

Edited by

CAROLE S. KESSNER

THE "OTHER"
NEW YORK JEWISH
INTELLECTUALS

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Hayim Greenberg

Marie Syrkin

Ben Halpern

Trude Weiss-Rosmarin

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Ludwig Lewisohn

Henry Hurwitz

Marvin Lowenthal

Maurice Samuel

A. M. Klein, Saul Hayes, and Monroe Abbey

Charles Reznikoff

Mordecai M. Kaplan

Milton Steinberg

Will Herberg

Acknowledgments

The idea for a volume devoted to the many committed Jewish intellectuals who were influential and played an important role in American Jewish life in the critical years of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s originated at a panel entitled “The Other New York Jewish Intellectuals: Hayim Greenberg, Maurice Samuel, and Marie Syrkin” that I organized for the Conference for the Association for Jewish Studies in 1989. Ben Halpern was present at that meeting, and it was at his suggestion that I began to think of a book on the subject. The AJS panel was followed by an expanded conference on the same subject sponsored by the Joseph and Ceil Mazer Institute for Research and Advanced Study in Judaica of the Graduate School of City University of New York and the Judaic Studies Department of the State University of New York at Stony Brook. For this latter conference I am grateful to Robert Seltzer for his proposal that we hold such a meeting and for his efforts to help organize it. Earlier versions of some of the essays in this volume were presented at the two conferences. I am also grateful to the American Jewish Archives at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati for awarding me a Lowenstein-Weiner fellowship for research on Marie Syrkin. It was while I was working on her biography at the Archives that I came to realize that there were two clearly distinguishable groups of Jewish intellectuals active in America in the first half of this century, and that one of them had never been properly recognized. Finally, I am indebted to Thomas Kranidas who gave me, as always, his own unique combination of intellectual insight and emotional support.

CAROLE S. KESSNER

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Introduction

Carole S. Kessner

Everyone knows the New York Jewish Intellectuals; but this book is not about them. This is about another group of intellectual Jews who lived and worked mainly in New York, men and women who were in no way ambivalent about their Jewishness. Although there is much that the two groups have in common, it is the role that Jewishness played in their identities, their ideas, and their activities that set them upon divergent paths which were to meet up only after 1967.

Recently, considerable attention has been lavished on the adventures and achievements of the New York Jewish Intellectuals. In addition to the numerous full-length historical and literary studies, a special issue of *American Jewish History*¹ was devoted entirely to them. There have been countless articles and essays, and in the last fifteen years an outpouring of personal memoirs by such luminaries as William Phillips, Irving Howe, Sidney Hook, William Barrett, Lionel Abel, and Leslie Fiedler. If we add the names Philip Rahv, Daniel Bell, Lionel Trilling, Saul Bellow, Delmore Schwartz, Alfred Kazin, Clement Greenberg, Isaac Rosenfeld, Harold Rosenberg, and Meyer Schapiro, we have a fairly representative list of the Jewish members of the New York Intellectuals of the thirties, forties, and fifties.

The fact that this outpouring of scholarship has happened somewhat belatedly—after all, their major work was done over thirty years ago—brings to mind an insight that Irving Howe had about the flowering of Jewish writing in the mid-twentieth century. Com-

paring two literary regional subcultures, the Jewish and the Southern, Howe claimed that, "in both instances, a subculture finds its voice and its passion at exactly the moment that it approaches disintegration."² His report of the death of American Jewish writing was a bit premature, for we find that the genre continues with subjects other than immigrant life. Yet his statement is perhaps apposite to the recent profusion of memoirs and scholarly retrospectives by and about the New York Intellectuals, and particularly in the light of Eugene Goodheart's penetrating essay "Abandoned Legacy."³ Goodheart points out that the legacy of the New York Intellectuals has been ignored by the contemporary literary academy and he argues that one reason for the abandoned legacy is the radical difference between the Marxism of the Old Left and contemporary academic Marxism, the public intellectualism of the former and the hermetic intellectualism of the latter. Hence the contemporary academic theorists, finding no useful model in the older Marxists, have left them for dead. This premature burial may also be the inevitable consequence of the older group's universalist aspirations at the expense of the particular.

Admittedly, this book too, arrives late. The "other" New York Jewish Intellectuals have never enjoyed proper celebrity. Few wrote memoirs; some individuals have been the subject of recent scholarship, but for the most part they have not been thought of as a group or community of intellectuals, despite the fact that their lives so frequently interacted and that they probably were more ideologically cohesive than the more prominent intellectual group. The justification for the studies in this book, however, is not eulogy but recuperation. Unlike those contemporary academics who can find little usable from the past, the contemporary scholars of Jewish life and letters who have written the essays in this volume have found much to admire and to emulate in these proudly affirmative Jews who in many cases were their teachers or their colleagues. The effort is a very Jewish one: commitment to the preservation of the worthy past and its incorporation into the present for the sake of the future.

Let me turn back now for a brief description of the New York Jewish Intellectuals so that we shall be able to measure the subjects of this book against them. Admittedly, the emblematic figure of this

group, Irving Howe, never really coined the term *New York Jewish Intellectual*, though the coinage gained currency after his well-known essay "New York Intellectuals" appeared in *Commentary* in October 1968.⁴ Remarking that although American intellectuals, including the Transcendentalists, have done their work mostly in isolation, one apparent exception is the group of writers (of which he himself was a member) who mostly had been resident in New York in the 1930s and 1940s and who rose to prominence in mainstream American intellectual life in the 1950s. The group primarily cohered around *Partisan Review*, which held the view that it was not only possible, but also natural, to unite aesthetic avant-gardism with political radicalism. Thus, in a bold act of literary miscegenation, Marxism and T. S. Eliotism found themselves under the same covers. Writing in 1968, Howe goes on to explain that the New York Intellectuals

appear to have a common history, prolonged now for more than thirty years; a common political outlook, even if marked by ceaseless internecine quarrels; a common style of thought and perhaps composition; a common focus of intellectual interests; and once you get past politeness—which becomes, these days, easier and easier—a common ethnic origin. They are, or until recently have been, anti-Communist; they are, or until some time ago were, radicals; they have a fondness for ideological speculation; they write literary criticism with a strong social emphasis; they revel in polemic; they strive self-consciously to be "brilliant"; and by birth or osmosis, they are Jews.⁵

In addition to this last defining clause, that "by birth or osmosis they are Jews," Howe informs us that this was the "first group of Jewish writers to come out of the immigrant milieu who did not define themselves through a relationship nostalgic or hostile to memories of Jewishness."⁶ These last two statements call for some examination. If they did not define themselves through nostalgia or hostility, then how did they define themselves Jewishly—simply through the accident of birth? The answer is a bit more complicated: they defined themselves Jewishly through their alienation from their Jewishness. This is an important point that I shall return to later. Furthermore, once Howe asserted of the New York Intellectuals that "by birth or osmosis, they are Jews," it was inevitable

that the word “Jewish” would be inserted into his more inclusive term; thus, New York *Jewish Intellectuals*, not always used by non-Jews without a hint of pejorative. From the reference to “osmosis” we can conclude that the New York Intellectuals included non-Jews who absorbed certain Jewish characteristics. The statement, however, does not suggest the opposite, which is also true. By the same “osmosis,” the Jewish members of the group absorbed certain qualities of such non-Jews in the group as F. W. Dupee, Dwight MacDonald, Edmund Wilson, William Barrett, and Mary McCarthy. Indeed, it was a symbiotic affair in which the Yale-educated critics, who had not quite broken free from a sense of American inferiority, loved the up-from-the-ghetto, City College-educated men (at the outset there weren’t any women in this group) for their universalism, their cosmopolitanism, their Europeaness, their exoticism, and, not the least, their brains. The City College types loved their non-Jewish counterparts for their particularism, their authentic Americanness, and for the ticket they provided for entry into the mainstream. It was an intermarriage made in atheist’s heaven.

Now, a few words about each of the terms of the descriptive label *New York Jewish Intellectuals*. First, the geographic locale. New York in this context functions more as metaphor than fact. Whereas it is true that all those in the group were not native New Yorkers and that some, like Saul Bellow, were identified with other cities, they became New Yorkers through their association with *Partisan Review*, and, as Eugene Goodheart has put it, “they belonged to a fraternity of intellect and sensibility.”⁷ This fraternity had its headquarters in New York.

What is meant by “intellectual” is more difficult to pin down. Russell Jacoby points out in *The Last Intellectuals* that “until recently arguments about ‘intellectuals’ took their cue from the Dreyfus Affair of the 1890’s. The artists, writers, and teachers, including Emile Zola, who challenged the state’s prosecution of Dreyfus, became known as the ‘intellectuals.’ ” For the anti-Dreyfusards they were a new and objectionable group. But as Jacoby further explains, the Russian term *intelligentsia*, which dates to the 1860s, “gradually passed into English or at least rubbed off on ‘intellectuals,’ darkening its oppositional hues.” The role of *intelligentsia*,

says Jacoby, was to pave the way for the Russian Revolution and it was almost exclusively defined by "its alienation from and hostility towards the state."⁸ This definition is particularly interesting in light of Irving Howe's claim that the "New York Intellectuals are perhaps the only group America has ever had that could be described as an intelligentsia." Howe quotes the historian of Russian culture, Martin Malia, who describes the intelligentsia as "more than intellectuals in the ordinary sense. Whether merely 'critical thinking' or actively oppositional, their name indicates that [in Russia] they thought of themselves as the embodied 'intelligence' . . . or 'consciousness' of the nation. They clearly felt an exceptional sense of apartness from the society in which they lived."⁹

It is this "sense of apartness" that is theme to the variations of almost every attempt to describe and define the Jewish intellectual, beginning with Thorstein Veblen's emphasis on marginality in his 1919 essay "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe." Veblen's theme can be heard in variations written by Daniel Bell, Lewis Coser, Isaac Deutscher, John Murray Cuddihy, Paul Mendes Flohr, Amos Funkenstein, and Sander Gilman. If we apply their insights to the case of the New York Jewish Intellectuals, it appears that they are intellectuals *par excellence*; doubly marginal, they are voluntarily estranged from the culture they were born into, involuntarily alienated from the society into which they wish to assimilate. In all cases the leitmotif is alienation.

We return now to the word "Jewish" as it appears in connection with the New York Intellectuals. By the 1950s, this group was at the peak of its power, and its members had begun to hold down academic positions in a variety of American universities; as Howe explains, "Some writers began to discover that publishing a story in the *New Yorker* or *Esquire* was not a sure ticket to Satan; others to see that the academy, while perhaps less exciting than the Village, wasn't invariably a graveyard for the intellect . . ."¹⁰ Mark Schechner has wittily added that this journey from the thirties to the fifties traveled the route from the Depression to depression—from radical politics to psychological neurosis.¹¹ This was inevitable because, as Howe himself has observed in two-thirds of a truth, "the New York writers came at the end of the modernist experience, just as they came at what may yet have to be judged the end of the

radical experience, and they certainly came at the end of the Jewish experience." As he rightly points out, the great battle for modernism raged in the 1920s and by the 1930s, when the New York Intellectuals sent in their troops, the battle was already over except for "skirmishes and mopping-up operations."¹² By the time *Partisan Review* was founded in 1936, Picasso, Stravinsky, and Joyce had already been proclaimed victors in the battle of the arts. Moreover, a good number of literary modernists, such as the notable anti-Semites Pound and Eliot, frequently aligned themselves with the political right and took ethical positions antithetical to those of the New York Intellectuals. With the hindsight of half a century, Howe was to write in 1991, "Eliot . . . was our 'culture hero.' " We failed to find—this is a judgement of retrospect—a coherent and dignified public response to the troubling passages about Jews that lie scattered in Eliot's work, passages far less virulent than those of Pound but quite bad enough."¹³

That they came at the end of the radical experience of the first part of this century is also true. The battle for orthodox Marxism was over as well. The only significant radical movement in America had been the Communist party, but by the late thirties even the YCL was losing its grip. The politically radical fiction of the thirties was the so-called proletarian novel, written by men and women overtly identified with the Communist party, such as Michael Gold (whose *Jews without Money* was the first important novel of the genre), James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, and other more or less familiar names. But by the mid-thirties this genre's life was about over. The trouble with this subclass of realistic fiction was that it espoused the theory that art is a weapon, that propaganda is art. Here it is apposite to note that the *Marxist Quarterly*, which Irving Howe argues was the most distinguished Marxist journal ever published in this country, began its life in 1937 and by 1938 had ceased publication. But *Partisan Review*, begun in 1936, was a journal of a different color—"off red"—for its founders, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, and Sidney Hook, had by this time shed any sympathy they might once have felt for Stalinism. The events of the thirties were too blatant to be excused; the Moscow show trials of 1936, the Hitler-Stalin pact, the dissection of Poland, and the invasion of Finland dealt staggering blows to most on the left. There would, of

course, be a few die hards such as Howard Fast, but for most Jews these were blows to the heart as well as to the head. *Partisan Review*, then, began with dissociation from the American Communist party; yet it held the hope that one could find some other system, a purified version of Marxism, perhaps something associated with Trotsky. But even this pious hope was doomed from the outset, for the times were out of “sync” with class struggle: the dark shadows of totalitarianism undercut these once-sacred categories. Lucy Dawidowicz recalled in her memoir of Vilna, *From That Place and That Time*, that she herself quit the YCL at Hunter College in 1936 when the Communist party, abandoning class against class, approved the united or popular front policy—that is, that “Party members were now directed to establish united fronts with all political forces, whatever their particular positions, so long as they opposed German Nazism and Japanese militarism.”¹⁴

Thus the New York Intellectuals arrived on stage for the last act of both cultural modernism and political radicalism. But what about the third part of Howe’s argument, that they also came at the end of the Jewish experience? True, they came at the end of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience—but, as we shall see from the essays in this book, that was not the *only* Jewish experience; and as we now see at the close of the twentieth century, there was to be much more to come with regard to the Jewish experience in America.

What is more to the point, however, is the fact that these were the very years that were dealing not merely blows to the heart, but now literal death blows to the Jewish world in Europe and in Palestine. Not only were these the years of the Nuremberg Laws, the Moscow trials, the British White Paper, the report of the Peel Commission urging the partition of Palestine, and the Arab disturbances, but the reports from the ghettos and the camps began to come in. For the ordinary Jew in America, though the crisis was not always immediately personal, it was profoundly communal. And where were these New York Intellectuals during the years of the least comprehensible man-made disaster in human history? Had their lives as “intellectuals” made them any more sensitive to the fate of the community they had rejected, scorned, and even satirized? Despite some of their late claims to an early response, the

truth appears to be that the unfolding of Soviet Russian history was more compelling for them than the fate of the Jews. Thus, by the postwar period, in political and intellectual crisis, in disillusionment and instability, the New York Intellectuals turned in three directions. The literary critics shifted to the political center, to democratic socialism and political liberalism, while at the same time embracing America by turning to American literature for its subject: Howe wrote on Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson; Rahv wrote his best essay on Whitman and James called "Palefaces and Redskins"; Trilling wrote on James, but, more the genteel Victorian than either Howe or Rahv, Trilling also wrote on Arnold and Forster; Kazin's best work was his hymn to America, *On Native Grounds*; and Fiedler produced his great celebration of America, *Love and Death in the American Novel*. The social scientists such as Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell, and the philosopher Sidney Hook, mostly turned to the right. In 1952, under the editorship of Elliot Cohen who had left *Menorah Journal*, *Commentary* became soft on anti-communism and tended to downplay the threat of the demagogue senator from Wisconsin. As for the creative writers—Bellow, Malamud, Schwartz, Rosenfeld, Goodman, and even Trilling with his foray into fiction (together with their disciples Roth and Mailer)—where could they turn? Many turned inward; having been betrayed by the faithless left, and themselves having spurned their Jewish origins, there was no romance for them save self-love. Alienated from their Jewish mothers, estranged from their Marxist fathers, they were orphaned in America. So they sought a system to heal their sickened souls: they found it in Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Karen Horney, and Carl Jung. Mark Schechner writes, "It was in the post-war climate of dis-orientation and regrouping that a few disheartened radicals turned toward psychoanalysis as an alternative to their shattered Marxism. Onetime partisans of the workers' vanguard or the popular front against fascism quietly lay aside their copies of *State and Revolution* to comb through *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* or the *Function of the Orgasm* for clues to the universal affliction that Karen Horney had called 'the neurotic personality of our time.'"¹⁵ Moreover, their mid-century angst placed these intellectuals acutely at the nerve center of postwar

philosophical and literary trends; they were a veritable casebook on French existentialism.

The New York novelists, now under the influence of psychoanalysis, began to reach back into their own Jewish family romances to create that brief moment in the sun for the Jewish American novel, the moment when Malamud's immigrant Jews of Brooklyn in *The Assistant* (like Joyce's Leopold Bloom before them), now stand for the marginality and alienation of all mankind; when Bellow's Augie March announces that he is an American—Chicago born, and in Bellow's later attack on alienation, when the assimilated Jewish academic Moses Herzog—the better to end his severe case of alienation—becomes his own analyst; when Philip Roth escapes from suburban Philistines in *Goodbye Columbus* to his interior, self-abusive refuge in *Portnoy's Complaint*. It cannot be denied, that all these fictions, together with many more, are about Jews—but mostly about the immigrant Jews the New York writers left behind for the non-Jewish Jews they had become. It is an irony, indeed, to read in the *New York Times* obituary for Irving Howe that "Perhaps his most famous book was *World of Our Fathers*, a history of Eastern European immigration to the United States that won the National Book Award in 1976."¹⁶ One is hard-pressed to avoid invoking Cynthia Ozick's now famous dictum "If we blow into the narrow end of the *shofar*, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain."¹⁷

The so-called New York Jewish Intellectuals, however, were not the only Jewish intellectuals active in New York during the critical years of the late thirties and forties. There was another group who read the ominous signs of the times and instantly knew that these were portents demanding drastic action. Without hesitation, this group of Jewish intellectuals rallied to the defense of their fellow Jews in Europe and in the Middle East. These men and women were not nearly so widely lionized, but they were quite as "intellectual" as those who cohered around two journals: *Jewish Frontier* and *Menorah Journal*. And while some writers of the former group, such as Lionel Trilling or Hannah Arendt, published early on in *Jewish Frontier* or *Menorah Journal*, writers from the latter group were not

represented in *Partisan Review*. Although the “other” New York Jewish intellectuals were little celebrated by the general American public, that is, Gentiles and non-Jewish Jews, the international Jewish world that had remained within the perimeters of Zionism, Yiddishism, Judaism, and Jewish culture in its infinite variety, respected and revered such names as Hayim Greenberg, Henry Hurwitz, Marie Syrkin, Maurice Samuel, Ben Halpern, Ludwig Lewisohn, and Mordecai Kaplan, among a longer list of influential thinkers.

This is not to suggest that these “other” intellectuals spoke in one voice, not in their politics nor in their Jewishness. Most were Zionists, a few were not; some advocated a binational state, some argued for partition; most argued against *shelilat ha golah* (negation of the Diaspora), one or two argued for it; some were secularists, others were religiously observant; some were immigrants to America, some were born in the United States. Yet perhaps what finally unites this group is what Ira Eisenstein has written about Henry Hurwitz: “He had always been an intellectual Jew, while younger writers and thinkers were, in fact, intellectuals who happened to be Jewish. The difference between the adjective and the noun was at the heart of their disagreement.” All the subjects in this volume are intellectual Jews. They were as fully engaged with world politics and the culture of their time as were the Jewish intellectuals: Lewisohn, for example, wrote one of the first analytical books on American literature; Greenberg exchanged views with Mahatma Gandhi; Samuel wrote a rejoinder to Arnold Toynbee; Halpern rebutted Daniel Bell’s “Parable of Alienation”; and Marie Syrkin took on Toynbee, Hannah Arendt, and Philip Roth. These “others,” in contrast to the *Partisan Review* intellectuals, never self-consciously strove to be “brilliant”; and most of all, they never described themselves as alienated—especially not from the Jewish world. They were nominatively, not nominally, Jews.

I have organized the essays in this book into three groups: Opinion Makers, Men of Letters (as it happens, there are no women in this group), and Spiritual Leaders. As the reader will see, the positions taken by these men and women are by no means identical; they do not espouse a “party line.” The first section, “Opinion Makers,”