

# The Greatest Jewish City in the World

By KONRAD BERCOVICI

**T**HERE is an old European saying that every country deserves the kind of Jews it has.

If so, New York does not know what it deserves, for it has every kind—gangsters, social workers, philanthropists, corrupt politicians, patriotic capitalists, preaching socialists, anarchists, bigots, atheists, ignorant illiterates, highly educated men. Every kind of Jew, from the lowest strata of humanity to the peak of culture, is represented here—a complete nation. The only way to purify water is to sterilize it. The only way to purify a nation is to kill it. You can kill a Jew but you can't kill the Jews. Spain has learned that. Russia has had her lesson. Poland has tried to solve her Jewish problem in a river. Hungary has imitated Poland. Rumania has tried to imitate them. Germany is doing it now. But it all comes down to one and the same thing. You can kill a Jew, ten, a hundred, a thousand, but you can't kill the Jews. They cannot even be absorbed. No sooner has the inevitable process of absorption begun in a country after two generations of tolerance have put their national or racial consciousness to sleep, than an anti-Semitic outbreak in that country or in another awakens the consciousness in the Jews and the reluctance to absorb them in the non-Jews. And the would-be alloy separates like non-mixable chemical matter, a little tarnished but not welded.

During my long residence in New York I have observed the following changes in one man: He arrived a bearded talmudical scholar in 1910. Rabbi Glockman was then less than thirty years old. He had a wife and four children, two sons and two daughters. The oldest was twelve years old, which meant that the father had married at eighteen. A year later Rabbi Glockman was still teaching Hebrew in a little after-school "Cheder" where the Jewish children were sent by their parents so as not to forget they were Jews. The school was on Division Street, way down on the East Side. Two years later, with the beard a little trimmed, Mr. Glockman owned a "Kosher" delicatessen store, on Second Avenue near Tenth Street. The place closed on Friday evening and remained closed till Saturday after prayers. Mr. Glockman was the president of a congregation. Four years later Mr. Glockman was partner in a shirt-waist factory where they worked on the Sabbath. The beard was completely gone. They lived in the Bronx. Six years later Mr. Glockman smoked on the Sabbath, ate "unclean" food, and was denounced in a strike as the worst exploiter. He employed only Italian labor and had changed his name to Bell, George Bell, and had moved from the Bronx to Morristown; because there were no Jews there. Eight years later his daughter had married a Gentile. But then the railroad strike broke out. The great Morristown plan, by which the wealthiest commuters manned the trains, entered into vogue. Mr. Bell came to the station every morning with his overalls under his arms ready to take his place as a scab—to help the country. But Mr. T. and Mr. D. and Mr. F. who were at the head would not have the Jew with them in the cab. He had to ride as a passenger. They would not even give him the privilege of acting as conductor. Today Mr. Bell is again Solome Glockman. He lives in Harlem, in the heart of the Jewish district. Is a

member of the congregation and a fanatical Zionist. Even the beard was allowed to grow back, a little trimmed, to its full length. Until the daughter divorced her husband and married a Jew she was not allowed to cross her parents' door.

An exception? No. It is typical.

When the first Jews came to live in New York, then New Amsterdam, in 1630 or thereabouts, Peter Stuyvesant was governor. They were known as Portuguese Jews. In reality they were Spanish Jews, escaped from Spanish persecution, who had acquired Portuguese citizenship in Brazil, then ruled by Portugal. Peter Stuyvesant unscrewed his wooden leg and beating the governmental desk with it asked their extermination. They were unworthy to tread the earth, he argued. He hated Jews. But that Mayflower Jewry dealt in gorgeous silks and beautiful jewelry which they received from compatriots the world over, and they had many supporters. There are several cemeteries full of these Jews in New York. One is a small triangle lot on the southeastern corner of Eleventh Street and Sixth Avenue. Another one is on the Bowery below Canal Street. There are washlines strung between the red-brick houses on both sides of this cemetery. The houses are inhabited by Greeks and Italians. At night the shadows of the fluttering white bed sheets give a ghastly animation to the weather-beaten crookedly-leaning grey tombstones. There is another cemetery in a back yard of a Jewish theater on Second Avenue.

If Peter Stuyvesant could only see what has happened! On his Bouwerie, his farm, close to the church his widow had erected to his memory, from one end to the other of his estate: Jews, nothing but Jews—synagogues and theaters—temples, Jewish institutions. His district sends Jewish representatives to the Assembly, to Congress, makes Jewish judges, and on the square, within earshot of his grave in the wall of the church, Jewish boys and women talk politics and religion and make love. And were it not for Jews who come to hear lectures on music and poetry his church would be empty on Sundays and holidays.

There are more Jews in New York than in Palestine, more than Palestine can ever hope to have. (For that matter there are more Italians in New York than in Rome, and more Greeks than in Athens.) Down on Allen Street, under the elevated railway, where the sun never penetrates, where the night is only a little darker than the day, live the Syrian and Moroccan Jews. You may see them on the street in civilized garb, but in their stores and houses, hammering out brass for lanterns and working at curiously patterned jewelry as they sit on their heels, Turkish fashion, they wear their own garments—the wide, large, folded pantaloons that come down to a narrow cuff at the ankles of the bare feet in red slippers. They wear long beards covering their chests. They wear heavy brocaded burnouses and on their heads rest small cone-like brown fezes. And their heavy, dark-eyed, olive-skinned women wear tasseled skirts, and white shawls over their black hair. Those who have arrived but recently still wear the yellow patch, the Jew sign of the Moroccan Ghetto. Try to speak Yiddish to them! Not a word do they understand. They speak Hebrew and Spanish—the old Castilian, to be exact. For they too are descend-

ants of the Spanish Jews. Their ancestors fled Spain centuries ago but they took the language with them; the language which Ibn Ezra, Ibn Gabirol, and Ben Halevy, the three great Jewish poetic stars of the Middle Ages, have immortalized in their beautiful verses. Today if a Spanish scholar desires to study the Castilian tongue he has to come to New York to study it from the Jews. They have their own synagogue, their own congregation, and even their own paper, printed in Spanish. They stand aside from the other Jews. They consider themselves superior; for their ancestors have been tortured on the rack in Spain. The early comers of the same race of Jews have enriched themselves, become multi-millionaires, in the tobacco and cigarette business, in the traffic in lace, jewelry, and silks. Only a great calamity, like the late war or the pogroms in Russia, awakens in them Jewish consciousness.

Below Allen Street, on Division Street, is Jewish Newspaper Row. There have long been four large Jewish daily papers. A fifth one under the editorship of L. E. Miller, the father of Jewish journalism in America, has just been revived. There are several weeklies—a reactionary one and one of anarchistic tendencies. The combined circulation of these papers is over a million a day. Probably half of that is subscribed by out-of-town readers. There are several periodicals in the old Hebrew of the prophets. On East Broadway and on Grand Street, back of the pushcarts, lit by smoking acetylene torches at night, behind rickety toys and second-hand new clothes, are several publishing-houses. They publish books written in Yiddish—modern books on philosophy and sociology, translations of Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, James, Marx, Tolstoi, Balzac, Dostoevski, and Jack London; also new editions of the Talmud with its commentaries, and treatises on the Cabala.

Every other day there arises a new great poet or prosaure on the East Side. One day it was Moritz Rosenfeld. His fame spread to the outer world, thanks to the interest of a Columbia professor of literature. His poems were translated into all the languages and praised in all of them. You can read about him that he was a tailor. A miracle had come to pass; a tailor became a great poet. What they forgot to say was that a great Hebrew scholar had become a tailor in America. Leon Dolitzky's fame rose. A six-foot-two giant, he was a legendary figure in Jewish life before he was twenty. You can still meet him at the Division Street cafe, as straight as an arrow at seventy. And if he likes you well enough he will read you his latest love poem. Then came Abraham Raisin, that sweetest of all singers. Sholom Asch, unsuccessful with three books translated into English, suddenly attracted attention with his play, "The God of Vengeance." And Pinski, Cahan, Moishe Nadir, Libin, Jehoash, Peretz Hirshbein, in whose plays Ben Ami starred, and a host of others too numerous to mention. The best of Jewish talent and intelligence crowds on an afternoon in the Division Street cafe and at the Royal on Second Avenue at night—painters, sculptors, musicians, poets, actors.

There are a dozen Jewish theaters in Greater New York with some three hundred plays in their repertoire. This repertoire includes Ibsen, Tolstoi, Andreiev, Pshibishevski, Sudermann, Schnitzler, Shaw, Shakespeare, and also includes such trash as one is ashamed to stumble upon. The Yiddish Broadway, Second Avenue, is an exact duplicate of the real Broadway. Actors and managers the world over are of the same ilk. The acting fraternity is a race apart. Language

is but a superficial distinction. But the Jewish acting profession in New York has given to the American stage some of its best—the Schildkrauts, father and son, Ben Ami, the Adlers, the Larrimores, Warfield, and a host of others. They may play on the English stage but when at leisure they come down to the East Side to meet friends. For it is the peculiarity of the Jew to return to his erstwhile haunts when successful. He returns there in cutaway and silk hat, bediamonded and with a condescending air. But he returns.

There is a cafe on Second Avenue where gather the parents and relatives of the celebrities. They are pointed out to strangers as the father of Elman, the brother of Levitzky, the sister of Alma Gluck, etc. One evening after a long absence Mischa Elman's father, a scholarly gentleman who would have won his spurs as a writer if his son had not become a great virtuoso, explained that he had visited nightly another coffee-house, frequented by talmudic scholars, where he was not known. Four weeks his happiness lasted. He gathered laurels of his own. Then some one who knew him came in, and the happiness was gone. It was his fate to be known only as Mischa's father.

When Mme. Gluck's sister discourses on music no one dares say a word. But the father of the son who had just graduated from the talmudic school on East Broadway is just as proud of his offspring as the father of the great lawyer or virtuoso or millionaire. It's the coffee-house of fathers and relatives.

Slowly the Jews have been pushed northward by the Italians, who have invaded their territory after being dislodged from theirs by the Syrians. Signs in Hebrew letters on the windows have been scratched out and Italian words painted there instead. You can still see the traces of the old signs. Many a synagogue became a Chiesa Cattolica. And in the move upward many a church was transformed into a synagogue. The Jews and Italians are always close neighbors in New York—heartily disliking one another, nevertheless. Two things make them so neighborly. The pushcarts first—the old oriental bazaar, with merchandise on the street, where one bargains for every article, where the buyer and the seller try to outwit one another, appeals to both peoples strongly. The pushcart trade exists only in Jewish and Italian settlements. Musical instruments side by side with onions, apples, garlic, praying shawls, phylacteries, holy images; a trick picture of Moses and Washington in one, and of the holy Virgin and Garibaldi next to it; plaster casts, cut glass, jewelry, furs, pistols, knives, fishing tackle, oysters, clams—the bazaar. Crowds. Noises. Quarrels. The Jew trying to speak Italian; the Italian offering his wares in a broken Yiddish. Curses in both languages. The children play. A hand organ with a chained black bird that "pulls out your luck" from the stack of yellow cards near its beak; a monkey climbing up the window to collect a penny; a phonograph hoarsely bellowing out the latest of Cantor Rosenblatt or Caruso. And from an open window in Hester Street come the strains of a perfectly played Beethoven Sonata. It's Hershman, the pushcart peddler's daughter, playing. He calls out "Apples, apples," and listens to her playing. On Mulberry Street the son of the tailor is getting ready for grand opera. On Delancey Street my barber used to leave me in the chair half shaved to go to the back of the store and remonstrate with his son for not practicing faithfully. That son was Max Rosen, the celebrated violinist. Once I had a sign painted by a youngster who is now a famous painter. The pushcart, the bazaar,

is the bond between the Italians and the Jews. I mean one of the bonds; the second is: Italians like fresh-killed meat and they can get it in Jewish butcher stores.

Crowded northward, the Jews discovered the wilds of the Bronx. The doctors advised them to go and live there when they had a "touch of consumption." It was "the country." What they did with these wilds is history. They destroyed beautiful forest estates and built ugly tenement houses, created a new Hester Street where there was a park. But they also created a town where there were only rocks and marshes. Theaters, synagogues, institutions, hospitals, factories, gambling houses, other houses. There is now a generation of Bronx Jews, quite distinct from the East Side Jew. It's the second generation Jew, with all the outward characteristics minus beard and mustache, playing baseball, great fight fans, commercial travelers, clean-shirted, white-collared, derby-hatted, crease-trousered. The women are stylish and stout, white-skinned, long-nosed, bediamonded; social workers, actresses, stump speakers, jazz dancers, with none of the color and the virtues of their erstwhile bearded, bewigged parents, and a few vices of their own acquisition. But they bathe frequently.

A third generation is now being housed on Riverside Drive. The Bronx having become "too Jewish" for them, they went to the "Drive." And as the Drive then still harbored the feeling voiced by many a to-let sign in Harlem and some parts above Gramercy Park, "No Jews," they did what they had done to Lakewood, New Jersey. Many years ago, Nathan Straus went to a Lakewood Hotel to pass a few weeks at that rather exclusive winter resort. The manager told him, "No Jews here." So he built a hotel next to it for Jews only. The result was that in a few years hundreds of little and big "kosher" hotels swamped the place. What happened to the "No Jew" place is history. The natives have not yet regretted the change. Last Christmas there was a Jewish flag on top of the community's Christmas tree on Main Street. Yes. It's what has happened to the Drive; they built tenement houses. It's no longer Riverside Drive; it's Jewish Drive. In another few years the Drive generation, a very much Americanized one, Glockmans in the last stage of "Bells," will leave the Drive to go elsewhere—because the Drive is too Jewish. Already many prefer to refer to their residences as Morningside. The East Side and part of the Bronx go to synagogues where the prayers are made in Hebrew. Harlem goes to Reform Synagogues where they have women in the choirs and organ music. The Drive goes to temples where the beardless Rabbis are doctors from American theological seminaries.

Yet so far the only cultural values have come from the East Side. The men and women contributing to American thought, American letters, American revolt, American art, American music, have come from the East Side—immigrants pregnant yet with their idealism, and the first generation.

I don't mean to say one has to elbow his way through swarming geniuses on the dirty East Side streets. On an evening, at the close of the factories and sweatshops, west of Third Avenue from Canal Street to Thirty-second Street, when the thousands and thousands are let loose from the chains of the needle-factory wheels, it looks as if it was the mission of Israel in America to trouser, coat and gown the rest of the population of this continent. Yet if it were not for the Jews the Metropolitan Opera House would only have its tier boxes and the upper gallery filled. The boxes

by the gentry and the gallery by the Italians on Italian nights. Go to Carnegie Hall or to Aeolian Hall at a worthwhile concert and perhaps you will change your opinion about Jews caring for nothing but dollars. You will see many a boy and girl who, you will think, could have used dollars in a more practical way.

As a matter of fact one does not exclude the other. Has not Jehuda Ben Halevy been a very practical man, and a great poet? Moses Mendelssohn, Moïse Dessauer, had been a banker, a bookkeeper, and a philosopher, whose book "Immortality of the Soul" will live longer than the glory of his son Felix. And many a great poet of today combines business ability with art.

Another fallacy is the great feeling of unity among all the Jews. As a matter of fact the Jews, the immigrants especially, live in national groups—the Rumanian Jews in one district, the Russians in another, the Polish and Galician elsewhere, and so on. The German Jews put a great distance between themselves and the others. One dislikes the other's peculiarities and all dislike the German Jews, especially because they rule the institutions, orphanages, hospitals, charity dispensaries, and the Educational Alliance, and because they treat the others with condescension. Before we entered the European war each Jew took sides with the country he migrated from. The German Jew could not forgive the Russian Jew for his successful invasion of the needle and real-estate trade. Now they frown on them because of their political activities. The argument is that they spoil the "good name" of the Jews by being Socialists and Bolshevists. In politics the German Jew has always sided with the stronger one.

How clannish the different Jewish nationalities are can be illustrated by the fact that only one Rumanian Jew is employed in all of the Yiddish newspapers. They are all in the hands of Russian Jews, with here and there a Polish or a Galician thrown in.

A million and a half of Jews from the world over in one city! Glockmans at different stages; tadpoles becoming frogs—and vice versa. In all walks of life, wedded to the country for good or worse, molding and being molded, shedding their colors (which do not always fall on barren soil), sing-songing the tongue they have acquired in the manner of the one they have forgotten, trying hard to fit old traditions in a new life—fathers looking upon sons as strangers, only half understanding them, never agreeing, desiring their children to Americanize, yet fearing the new will never be worth the old, subconsciously hoping that a wave of anti-Semitism will rescue the race from assimilation.

### Contributors to This Issue

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