
The product of a working class family from the Bronx, Bess Meyerson declined to change to a less Jewish-sounding name for the Miss America contest of 1945. "Now Besseleh," her father repeated, "don't forget who you are out there." When she became the first Jew to wear the crown, Meyerson gazed at the crowd at the Warner Theater "and saw all the Jewish people hugging each other, congratulating each other, as though they had won." Her ego trip had been de-railed. "I didn't want to be their beauty queen," Meyerson remembered. "But if I was—and I surely was—I didn't want to disappoint them."

Like Meyerson, many Jews prospered in the free, open, and relatively tolerant society of the United States, maintaining their Jewish identity while assimilating into American culture. In *The Jewish Americans*, Beth Wenger, a professor of history and director of the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, tells their stories, supplementing her narrative with first-person accounts of prominent and little known Jews, including Louis Brandeis, Abraham Cahan, Hank Greenberg, Albert Einstein, Stephen Wise, Betty Friedan, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. A companion volume to a recently aired six-hour PBS documentary, *The Jewish Americans* is lavishly illustrated. It is a splendid synthesis of a history that is, at once, inimitably Jewish and classically American.

Wenger's study is organized into four separate sections, each of them pivoting on the struggle of Jews to retain their religious and ethnic character while becoming active and accepted citizens of their adopted land. "They Came to Stay" (1654-1880), follows the early settlers as they spread across America. These Jews, Wenger demonstrates, lamented religious laxity and the absence of "Yiddishkeit" in their communities. But by the middle of the nineteenth century,
they built scores of synagogues across the country. And they felt sufficiently secure to speak up for their rights. In 1787, Jonas Phillips, a German-Jewish merchant in Philadelphia, wrote to members of the Constitutional Convention to protest a Pennsylvania law requiring office-holders to take an oath attesting to their faith in the New Testament. Three years later, the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island asked President Washington to give "bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

"A World of Their Own" (1880-1924) tells the familiar story of the emigration of 2.5 million Jews from eastern Europe to the United States. As they struggled for economic security, and coped with the prejudice of Protestants and the indifference of "German Jews," the "greenhorns," Wenger emphasizes, "aspired to mainstream American lifestyles and values." To illustrate, she includes an exchange in *The Bintel Brief* (bundle of letters), a popular column in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, in which editor Abraham Cahan recommended that an eighteen year old bookkeeper, whose immigrant parents had "no idea as to my intellectual needs," read Jack London, William Dean Howell, and Upton Sinclair. She reprints as well the *Forward's* unintentionally hilarious attempt to explain "in plain, 'unprofessional, and 'unscientific' Yiddish," the fundamentals of the quintessentially American game of baseball.

"The Best of Times, the Worst of Times" (1924-1945) is a poignant account of restrictions on immigration that reduced to a trickle the flow of Jews into the United States. As they became more comfortably middle-class, the second generation became more estranged from the world of their fathers and mothers. And they watched, anxiously, as a riding tide of anti-Semitism emerged abroad and at home. The pleas of Henry Morgenthau Jr, President Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, to rescue the Jews of Europe from extermination largely fell on deaf ears. Little wonder, then, that Ruth Gruber, a special assistant in the Interior
Department, who helped settle Jewish refugees in Oswego, New York, "realized that every one of them was alive through a miracle."

"Home" brings the story into the twenty-first century. Having gained unprecedented acceptance, prosperity, and pride of place in American culture, Jews wrestle anew with individual and collective identities. Rates of inter-marriage have skyrocketed, throwing in question the future of "the race." Orthodox and secular Jews appear to have less and less in common. Israel presents an alternative homeland. The Jewish community in America, Wenger concludes, "defies neat categorization." But, her wonderful book also reveals, the community remains vibrant, bringing honor to people who used to be denigrated as “hyphenates.”

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