Poor little rich Jew
By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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At its best, Sharon Pomerantz’s first novel adds to the ‘American dream’ genre by vividly evoking the experiences of Jews in the four decades following World War II.

‘If you ask me,’ Sally Johannson, the aspiring actress who is working as a shoe-shine girl, tells Robert Vishniak, the saddest people in the world are “the people who have it all.”

Sharon Pomerantz agrees. In Rich Boy, her first novel, Pomerantz tells the story of Robert’s rise and fall. He’s a baby boomer, born to a working-class family in Philadelphia, whose Jewishness was “more culinary than scriptural.”

Though the Vishniaks dreamed of things beyond making the mortgage payments, Robert’s dad ended up at the post office; his mom cleaned the house, washed the clothes, prepared the meals, did her own home repairs, paid the bills, “squeezing twenty dollars out of each nickel,” and worked as a school crossing guard to keep an eye on her boys. The folks on Disston Street, they believed, were honest. But they were suckers. And so, the Vishniaks told Robert, even though professional life was rife with corruption, it was far “better to be the Man than serve the Man.”

He learns this lesson – with a vengeance.

Determined to escape his past, Robert attends Tufts University in Boston, where he meets the wealthy, worldly, WASPy and well-connected Sanford Trace. After taking a drug-induced detour, along with so many other Americans in the 1960s and ‘70s, making ends meet as a taxi driver, Robert loses the love of his life. But he wills his way back, goes to law school, marries Crea Alexander, a woman he likes and admires, and accepts a position as an associate in her father’s firm. He would be practical, for once, Pomerantz indicates, “and take the deal that was offered.”

Outwardly successful, Vishniak feels “adrift.”

Embarrassed by his family, he “wants to do for them while simultaneously wanting them to go away.” Nor does he feel comfortable on Park Avenue or at his in-laws’ retreat at Tuxedo Park, a gated community, 40 miles north of Manhattan, with a private lake, 1,100 acres of parkland, the country’s second-oldest golf course and
Tudor and Gothic revival-style homes “with turrets and domed rotundas like castles out of a children’s story.”

This cautionary tale of the alienation and loneliness that accompanies the pursuit of the American dream by the “self-made” man has, of course, been told before, most notably in The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald and, for Jews, by Abraham Cahan in The Rise of David Levinsky. Rich Boy, in essence, endorses themes about social class and ethnicity that were examined, more profoundly, by them. At its best, however, the novel adds to this distinguished line of fiction by vividly, and at times hilariously, evoking the lived experiences of second- and third-generation Jews in the four decades following World War II.

Robert arrives at Tuxedo Park, for example, wearing his swim trunks underneath his dress clothes: The habit was a holdover from his childhood when the changing rooms at public pools were crowded and smelly and his relatives eager to get right to the water.

When the Vishniaks made an excursion to Atlantic City, Robert remembers, they ate in the car, reaching into a plastic Korvette’s shopping bag for pastrami sandwiches, coleslaw, angel food cake, drinks and paper napkins.

They stayed in a rooming house, a rattrap divided into tiny apartments, with a bathroom on each floor, and one kitchen, shared by all the families. Every summer, Pomerantz writes, someone would accuse a person from another clan of stealing food from the communal refrigerator or insist that a pot be re-koshered “because a mysterious ghost in the night had taken liberties with a fry pan.”

Unfortunately, charming and enlightening passages like these occur all too infrequently in Rich Boy. Pomerantz is not a gifted writer of dialogue. “Your errand is futile,” she has Sanford Trace proclaim. And she tends to belabor the obvious by telling what she has already shown. In a city as “huge and demanding” as New York, she writes, ponderously and portentously, Robert knew that “when you found a place to make your own, you held on for dear life.” After Vishniak tells Crea that she is as beautiful as her mother, Pomerantz feels compelled to add: “He was aware that there were times when a man must lie, and this was one of them.”

Rich Boy ends with the suggestion that you can go home again. After his mother dies, Robert declares that she was “the least clichéd person he’s ever known” – and decides that a chest of drawers and an oak secretary, once owned by grandma Kupferberg, are worth keeping: “They weren’t covered in protective plastic, and he wanted both for himself.” With a group of girls jumping rope between parked cars, and a man in an undershirt limping up Disston Street, Pomerantz claims that “for a strange and wonderful moment,” Vishniak “knew where he belonged.” You’d like to believe her – and him. But, in all likelihood, you won’t.

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