‘Forverts’ thinking

Seth Lipsky, founding editor of the English-language ‘Forward,’ pens a lively, concise biography of Yiddish ‘Jewish Daily Forward’ founder Abraham Cahan

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urged by an acquaintance to emigrate from Russia to Palestine, 22-year-old Abraham Cahan opted instead to settle in the United States. In that far-off country, Cahan envisioned a life of equality, "without 'mine' or 'thine,'" a socialist utopia "that could become a reality now." Cahan’s spirit soared, all other plans abandoned, and in 1882 he left his family and made his way to the "Golden Land."

Fifteen years later, Cahan helped found The Jewish Daily Forward, a Yiddish newspaper, based in New York City, which educated and entertained millions of Jewish Americans. With the publication of The Rise of David Levinsky in 1917, he became the leading interpreter of the possibilities and pitfalls of the "Americanization" of Jews.

In The Rise of Abraham Cahan, Seth Lipsky, the founding editor of the English-language Forward (and of The New York Sun), provides a concise and lively biography of the legendary editor and novelist.

Although he was never a socialist, Lipsky, like Cahan, moved from left to right on the political spectrum. The end of the Cold War, Lipsky claims, vindicates Cahan’s anti-Communism. More important, Lipsky emphasizes the impact of Cahan’s enthusiastic embrace of "the idea of America" on generations of Jews.

He documents as well how the secular and socialist Cahan came to believe that Jewish traditional values have a right of residence in Jewish hearts; that we can (or at least ought to be able to) confess that Jews are, naturally, closer to us than other people; and that Jews deserve a home in Palestine.

However, the book is marred by factual mistakes and extravagant claims. Lipsky suggests, erroneously, that William Howard Taft was running for re-election as president in 1908. He asserts that as editor of the Forward, Cahan attained "unparalleled power and influence" in the "emerging reformation movement" in the United States and that the newspaper "changed the course of Jewish history."

He deems the Balfour Declaration "the most important letter in modern history supporting the Jews as a people." He insists that in failing to grasp its moral dimensions and practical implications in 1917, Cahan was "out of touch."

Cahan was "out of touch with the wider Jewish masses, who found the Zionism vision extraordinarily inspiring"—only to acknowledge (30 pages later) in the 1920s and 1930s Cahan "was running ahead of important sectors of the American-Jewish community," who remained opposed to the idea of Jewish nationhood.

Most curious, perhaps, is his attribution of the collapse of the Soviet Union to a "three-pronged strategy led by president Ronald Reagan, pope John Paul II, and Lane Kirkland of the AFL-CIO."

Lipsky’s analysis of The Rise of David Levinsky is more nuanced and more interesting. He speculates that Cahan may have surprised himself with a narrative that emphasized that capitalism allowed Levinsky to amass a fortune while improving social conditions by making inexpensive goods available to millions of people.

Lipsky reminds us how effectively Cahan recreated the "assimilated Jew," rich in material goods but spiritually, emotionally and intellectually impoverished, who could not put his past behind him. He wonders, however, whether Cahan would have chosen a lonely capitalist "as the hero of his masterpiece" if he had written the novel after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Lipsky also provides a moving account of Cahan’s trip to Palestine in 1925. Following visits to seven synagogues and the Western Wall on Yom Kippur, he writes, "the sixty-five-year-old atheist wept."

Determined to describe "all shades of life and each and every corner honestly," Cahan soon found himself "dwelling" over agricultural settlements and kibbutzim. Zionists, he told his readers, had managed to melt into "irrelevant pronouncements about class struggle and social revolution."

"I can’t help it. I must marvel at the heroic fire that burns in them."

When he returned to New York City, Cahan continued to maintain that he was not a Zionist, but added that neither was he an opponent of the "Palestinian movement." More jobs and higher wages for Arab farmers and workers, as well as more opportunities for Arab businessmen, "with the Jews playing a leading role in the improvement of conditions," Cahan predicted, "this will shatter the anti-Semitic propaganda."

Cahan lived long enough to see the establishment of the State of Israel. Abba Eban, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, represented the Jewish state at his funeral in 1951. In his eulogy, Lipsky reveals, Eban did not address Cahan’s mixed views of Zionism, concentrating instead on his advocacy of social progress and Yiddish journalism.

In a sense, Lipsky concludes, the eulogy missed the point. What Cahan “really longed for was to create a literature that immortalized his own culture in a way that his literary heroes had immortalized theirs.”

With The Rise of David Levinsky, which, ironically, was the last novel he ever published, Cahan went a long way toward doing just that.

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