

Gerald Sorin. *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) x, 211 pp., \$24.95.

Citing the large numbers of Jewish immigrants who were active in the labor movement and in "radical" political parties around the turn of the century, Sorin posits a correlation between these activities and the immigrants' religious background. Specifically, he credits the "messianic" teachings of the Old Testament prophets—notably Isaiah—as motivating force and source of inspiration for the immigrants' political and social activities.

Sorin's premise for this study is stated unequivocally in the introduction:

The evidence strongly suggests that the Jewish socialists were a prophetic minority, responding to biblical norms of social justice, interpreted in a modern context. They were men and women who had been deeply immersed in the moral commandments of Torah and Talmud, in messianic belief-systems, traditions of *tsedaka* (not mere charity, but righteousness and justice toward others), mutual aid, and communal responsibility.

Sorin's "evidence" consists in histories of the Socialist and Communist parties and the labor movement in the U.S., and writings, interviews and oral histories of seventy nine Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. They represent some of the most significant labor and political leaders of the period between 1880 and 1920, among them: Charles Zimmerman, Pearl Halpern, Anna Rappaport, Emma Goldman, Rose Schneiderman, Rose Pesotta, Isadore Wisotsky, Saul Yanofsky, Abraham Shiplacoff.

The messianic teachings of the prophets, to which Sorin refers repeatedly, provided the models of social organization and human behavior for Jews and by extension and transference, the ethical, oral and social models for Christianity as well. Obligatory social responsibility is implicit in Judaic ethics: Each person must care not only for himself and for his family but also for his brothers' welfare and his neighbors'. Implicit also is the obligation to assume responsibility for the welfare of society as a whole and to take necessary action to improve and maintain it. In even the smallest shetl or village, the comprehensive organizations created to provide for the needy and for the general welfare, represented a direct application of the collective assumption of social responsibility. The immigrants' fervent involvement in the labor movement and in political and social parties was yet another demonstration of their well-defined sense of social responsibility.

There is much discussion of the European Socialist and Anarchist movements in which many of Sorin's subjects were involved prior to emigrating. He overlooks, or fails to mention, that these movements were the only source of hope to those who were impoverished and oppressed by discriminatory social and economic restrictions. To the victims of the pogroms, these movements offered solutions to the inequities, corruption and prejudice that oppressed all but a privileged few. Sorin's informants explain it eloquently: When their living conditions in Europe became

intolerable and the possibility of achieving social reform an impossible dream, emigration to America became the only solution. The immigrants carried only a few material possessions but brought with them the enormous collective weight of Judaic ethical and moral precepts.

The immigrants also came, for the most part, fully committed to their new homeland, but Sorin does not acknowledge either the extent of this commitment or its implications. The immigrants' rapid involvement in social and political reform in the U.S. was a logical consequence of their cultural conditioning and prior involvement in reform movements in Europe and a manifestation of their commitment. If they had found America to be not quite as perfect as they had hoped, it was a moral obligation (accepted without question) to try to improve it.

Sorin chose to offer biographical sketches of his informants within the text proper and in a dedicated chapter. Unfortunately, the biographical information tells us nothing about the subjects' attitudes or personalities and the hyperbole obscures the significant contributions of these creative, vital people. The biographies reveal Sorin's inconsistent scholarship for they were clearly not researched. In at least one instance (Rose Pesotta) the information is not accurate.

Regrettably, the quotations are frustratingly brief and fragmented. Sorin does not reveal how the interviews were conducted, whether the informants were interviewed in person, or were simply sent questionnaires to complete, or even if all the informants were asked the same questions. The omission of this information and the sloppiness with which sources are acknowledged in the notes do not serve to inspire confidence in the credibility of Sorin's research and scholarship.

Sorin teases and tantalizes his readers with the briefest of excerpts from his informants' texts, but they redeem his work and for these fragments alone, the book merits attention. The snippets of text we are permitted to read vibrate with their glowing dreams of a world without hunger or fear, of a world with economic opportunity and equitable rewards and social justice for all. Their energy and commitment, their fervor and dedication are manifest in word and deed.

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