

## on not making it in america

jules zanger

A number of years ago, a talented young novelist named Dan Greenberg wrote a book entitled *How to be a Jewish Mother*. The true significance of his title, it seems to me, was not in its assertion but rather in its easy assumption that everyone knew what the author meant by being “a Jewish Mother.” I feel that, in great part, he was correct in this assumption. The Jewish mother has become an American commonplace: from Molly Goldberg of radio fame, to George Jessel’s Yiddishe Momma, to Rhoda’s mother on television, through all her minor manifestations in stand up comedians’ wise-cracks and Alka-Seltzer commercials, the “Jewish mother” has become a familiar sentimentalized figure in American popular culture.

Beneath this conventional popular stereotype lies a substratum of more serious literary treatment—a procession of literary versions of Jewish motherhood that punctuate the history of American-Jewish writing with such frequency that the centrality and significance of the mother to at least this ethnic group is undeniable. I am certain that most readers will immediately recall the abominable Sophy in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, but earlier works like Clifford Odets’ *Awake and Sing*, Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep*, Sholem Ashe’s *The Mother*, Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* and Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*, all focus to a greater or lesser degree on this figure. It is difficult to find a similar tradition in the mainstream of American fiction (though Amanda in Tennessee William’s *Glass Menagerie* is an immediately recalled exception to this generalization).

I would offer that the frequency with which the mother appears as a major character in works by Jewish writers and the frequency with which she is presented as rejected by her son suggest that the denial of the mother has come to stand in the Jewish literary imagination for the rite of passage necessary for the male Jew to pass into the mainstream of American culture—to lose his ethnic identity as Jewish-American. It sug-

gests that for the Jewish son or, at least, the Jewish son in literature, turning his back on his mother has come to symbolize the rejection of a total cluster of religious and cultural values rooted in the European experience and is a necessary ritual of the Americanization process. In this sense, that sad collection of mocked and reviled literary and sub-literary Jewish Mommas can be seen as a succession of pious memorials created by guilty American sons who attempt to expiate their guilt by exacerbating it while, at the same time, to declare their naturalization and their freedom.

As I have suggested, this mother-son relationship proves to be the most common literary metaphor for the Americanization experience of the Jewish emigrants, summarizing all of the complexities of that experience in a clearly comprehensible dramatic confrontation. It became the literary device for objectifying a wide variety of social conflicts—between European and American Jews, between the poor and the successful, between first and second generations and between political and religious positions. Further, as a literary device it possessed genuine dramatic impact since the tension between the agonists involved conflicting value structures both of which had intense emotional power. The triumph of the son, which seemed to be inevitable in the fiction, was always stained with guilt and self-recrimination.

Obviously this domestic confrontation embodied many more elements than the son's rejection of the mother. At issue more significantly was the problem of apostasy: apostasy to the family, to the Faith, and to the community. Beyond the immediate issue of physical survival, the problem of ethnic survival always loomed large for the Jewish community, and the drama of apostasy spoke directly to the community's anxieties. The freedom that America offered was always tempered by the license it permitted. The *shtetl* had been poor and vulnerable to Czarist terror and peasant pogrom, but it was a cohesive community whose limits of possibility were harshly enforced by a hostile Christian society. Once the Pale was down, who could tell where the liberated might wander? The Jews had fled from their European communities, in most cases of their own free will, leaving behind them not only the poverty and the terror but equally the piety, the order and the cohesion. The hope that America offered was emotionally balanced by the uneasiness that the loss of community brought. Now this uneasiness was being reified by their own children raised in America: just as they themselves had deserted the paths of their fathers, so their children were growing up alienated from their parents' *Yiddishkeit*.

Within this domestic drama of apostasy one could also recognize an echo of the familiar Old Testament myth of the Fall with its plot of individuals tested, of their failure, and ultimately of their exile into the Wilderness of the World. Unlike, however, the Biblical formulation in which the Garden of Piety and Obedience to God was a Garden of Plenty, and the Wilderness of exile a wilderness of thorns and thistles,

ethnic identity in America seemed indissolubly linked to poverty, and the wilderness of Americanization seemed to promise opulent success.

Though all immigrant groups were forced to discard certain of their customs and practices in order to achieve this success in American society, the process of Americanization for the Jews was particularly dramatic. Orthodox Judaism, which was the faith of the vast majority of those Jews who came to America around the turn of the century, is a religion which is distinguished from the other major faiths by its extraordinary emphasis on external practices and rituals. Almost all of those ordinary daily acts that we normally regard as purely secular were invested by the devout with religious meaning. When the pious Jew rose, there was an appropriate prayer, when he washed, when he ate, when he drank, when he heard thunder, when he saw a rainbow: there was a prayer for bread, one for meat, one for wine, one for milk; the clothes he wore, the skull-cap, the prayer shawl, the wig the married women wore, the beard and side-curls worn by the men—all were prescribed by scripture or tradition, as were the manners in which food was prepared, the pots in which it was cooked, the dishes on which it was served, the very order in which it was eaten: most of these things were acts performed ritualistically and accompanied by prayer. This combining of the religious with the commonplace, this embodying of the sacred in the daily secular act gave to Orthodox Judaism a particular immediacy, a direct intensity and relevance to experience that normally served to strengthen its survival value. Here in the United States, however, it was precisely this externalization of faith that made Orthodox Judaism terribly vulnerable to the Americanization process which attacked not the mystical center of faith but its secular embodiments. It was for this reason that the Americanization process, as it affected the Jewish immigrant, operated differentially upon Jewish men and upon Jewish women. It was because of this differential rate of Americanization that the Jewish mother emerged as the symbol of traditional ethnic and religious values in a society which had otherwise been essentially patriarchal.

Traditionally, the functional pattern of the Jewish family was a conventionally familiar one. The woman's role was domestic: she was housekeeper and mother, and her skills and responsibilities were indistinguishable from those of women in her economic class in any of the other minorities teeming to America, or from those of the majority, except, perhaps, in one particular. On each Friday night it was she, not her husband, who performed the ritual lighting of the candles; it was she who recited the prayers that brought in the Sabbath; it was she who served as the priestess of the home. Other religious holidays were dominated by the men of the household, but the Shabbos belonged particularly and powerfully to the woman. In *Call It Sleep* Henry Roth described that ritual and implied something of its emotional significance to the child:

The match rasped on the sandpaper, flared up, making David aware of how dark it had become.

One by one she lit the candles. The flame crept tipsily up the wick, steadied, mellowed the steadfast brass below, glowed on each knot of the crisp golden braid of the bread on the napkin. Twilight vanished, the kitchen gleamed. Day that had begun in labor and disquiet, blossomed now in candlelight and Sabbath.

With a little, deprecating laugh, his mother stood before the candles, and bowing her head before them, murmured through the hands she spread before her face the ancient prayer for the Sabbath. . .

The hushed hour, the hour of tawny beatitude.<sup>1</sup>

In Jo Sinclair's novel *Wasteland* (1946), the narrator recalls the same ritual with similar feelings from the point of view of an adult:

She was ready to light the Sabbath candles. He watched intently as she placed the joined candlesticks in the center of the bureau on a small scarf, which would keep the dripping wax from the wood. She drew the shawl that lay around her shoulders up over her head, so that most of her hair was covered. Watching, he saw one tiny flame after another appear as she touched a match to each candle, and then the shadows appeared on the ceiling above her as she bent her head and covered her face with her hands.

He heard the whisper of prayer drift through her fingers as she swayed, and he remembered all the times he had watched her light candles, all the years of it, and how as a child he had come to stand close to her and look up at her hands in the candle light, at her bowed head, at the secret and mysterious tips of gold light at the ends of the thick, white, penny candles. Then, as now, the beautiful shadows had sprung up to the ceiling and flickered there, and Ma had whispered the solemn-sounding prayers for the lighting of the Sabbath candles.<sup>2</sup>

These were kitchen rituals of great emotional power and dramatically symbolized the sustaining, unifying function of the mother in the home. The chicken soup, "Eat, eat" jokes must be seen as hostile vulgarizations of this function.

To the degree that the woman could remain within her home, her tenement, her ghetto street, she could retain both her secular and her religious function. For the man, however, the situation was quite different.

The necessity of supporting his family, of working in secular America, rapidly changed the father. Under the pressure of earning a living, he had first to rid himself of the appearance of the Green-horn. In his desire to appear American, he trimmed his beard, and then shaved it altogether, cut off his sidelocks, and exchanged his skull-cap for the ubiquitous American Derby. The working hours of the factory or sweatshop in which he was employed permitted him to eat only in the most haphazard, hasty way, and so the ritual dietary laws had to be violated. The American work week at this time usually extended into Saturday, and so the

holiness of the Sabbath itself was broken. The Polish Catholic immigrant could change his style of dress, the manner of food he ate, the way in which he earned his living, almost any aspect, that is, of his daily life without altering his religious position and his relationship to his church and his community.<sup>3</sup> The Polish Jewish immigrant who shaved his beard and donned the derby was regarded by the remaining Orthodox as an apostate. Perhaps even more significantly, he frequently shared this judgement of himself, which served to further his alienation and make the next violation easier. Ironically, those progressive steps of Americanization taken in order to support and maintain the family and, by extension, the Jewish community, served to cleave and fragment that family and community, dividing them into orthodox and Apostate, into pious Jew and new American.

As much as anything else, this division expressed itself in terms of language—the Yiddish remaining the tongue of the home, in its fullest sense the Mother tongue, while English, or what passed for English, became the speech of the street, of the job, and of the compulsory public school.

The immigrant child, of course, was to bear the greatest weight of the Americanization process, and the instrument of this process was the public school. The mother, remaining within the enclave of her home, was to be denied the primary means for entering the broadstream of American culture—the English language. Her children attending the compulsory public schools learned English relatively rapidly. Her husband, working in a shop or factory, acquired his English more slowly and in a more limited fashion; she however, usually remained trapped behind the barrier of language which not only cut her off from the greater American community, but eventually cut her off from her own children. It was not only through the medium of language, however, that the public school served to alienate the child from his parents. More pervasively, it alienated the child from his elders by making him deeply ashamed of their broken speech, of their clothes, of the traditional foods they ate and, perhaps above all, of their poverty which was the incontrovertible proof of their failure to become real Americans.

To this progressive alienation of their children, the immigrant parents could only acquiesce, since it was an expression of that education which offered the family its only means of leaving the ghetto. By one of those happy serendipities of history, the Pendleton Act, which instituted the first major civil service reforms, was passed in 1882, just a few years before the first massive Jewish immigrations began. The possibility of government employment through competitive examination without regard to race or religion was a powerful incentive to a people already inclined to be bookish. Those impulses which in Russia and Poland had been confined to the painstaking study of the Holy Books, were to be liberated and secularized in the United States and put into the service of Success.

In this quest for Americanization, education and success, the children,

especially the boys, led the way. The fathers haltingly followed, and the mothers remained in the ever narrowing trap of their ethnic identity. The children became the intermediaries between their parents and America, taking the lead in the family's relationship with the teachers, the politicians, the inspectors, the social workers and the policemen who represented authentic America to the immigrant. In this inversion of the traditional parent-child relationship, the child truly became father to the man, stripping him of much of an authority that had already grown shaky. In this role reversal, what values, what culture, what experience the immigrants brought with them from Europe were rejected as old-fashioned or Greenhorn or as simply irrelevant to the needs of the new country.

Curiously, in this rejection of the parents by the children, the mother appeared to fare better than the father. Her relative exclusion from the Americanization process permitted her to retain a dignity and a sphere of authority that her husband lacked. The price she had to pay, however, was a high one: to remain within the ghetto of her life as wife and mother. In the half-way house of his Americanization, the father had given up much of his religious integrity and his ethnic identity in pursuit of a secular success that much more often than not, eluded him. In the mythic dramatization of the conflict between old and new, between European and American, between faith and secularism, between Jew and Apostate, it is the mother who becomes the embodiment of traditions, not the father. Though what the mother in these fictions stands for is ultimately rejected, she stands for something. In American-Jewish writing, to an overwhelming degree, the father appears as failure: as failure as father, as husband, as Jew, as provider. In Cahan's *Rise of David Levin-sky*, David's father is dead at the outset of the novel; in Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*, he is a cripple supported by his wife and son; in John Cournos' *The Mask*, the step-father is a repeated bankrupt supported by his wife and children; in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, the father is violent, hostile, a man unable to hold a job, mad with the fear of being a cuckold and terrorizing his wife and son; in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing*, the father is a pathetic, ineffectual failure living in a sentimentalized past. In more recent works like Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland*, the father is a filthy, selfish old man whose influence twists and deforms his wife and children; in Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March*, the father has casually deserted the mother and children; and, of course, in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, the perpetually constipated Jack Portnoy is totally ineffective against the strength of his wife. If the Jewish mother has become a staple both of popular culture and of American-Jewish writing, it is explained in great part by this gallery of failed Jewish fathers (behind each Jewish mother fails a Jewish father).

One element leading to this pattern of failure was, of course, the Great Depression to which recent immigrants, never particularly secure, were especially vulnerable. It is interesting to speculate that if the Jewish

migrations had begun two decades earlier, the Jewish Mother as a literary stereotype might never have come into existence. Arriving when they did, however, it was precisely the second and third generations, those generations out of which the writers were to emerge, which were to bear the brunt of the Depression. The dominance and strength of the mothers portrayed were an expression of the necessity to assume the role left vacant by men weakened and stripped of authority by an economic system that demanded they exchange their birthright for merest survival. Many of these women, then, would leave their homes and Sabbath candles to follow their husbands into the sweatshops of the American wilderness where they were to become as avid as any for survival for their generation and success for their children's. Appropriately enough, this pattern of strong mothers and weak fathers is totally absent from the novels of Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, in which the central characters retain their religious and ethnic commitment. These Jews are relative late-comers and have been spared the dislocations of the Ghetto and Depression shaped Americanization process.

If the pattern of the unavailable father, the weak father, the father as failure appears with a certain consistency, this cannot be said of the presentations of the Jewish mother. Two distinct stages can be seen in her depiction.

In those books describing the Jewish-American experience which appeared in the first part of the century, the mother is highly praised, sentimentalized, adored. She is shown as totally devoted to her family, fiercely protective of her children, and completely self-sacrificing. In Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, when the 18 year old David is beaten by a gang of Russian hooligans, it is his mother who rushes out to attack the mob and to be murdered by it. Eventually it is her martyrdom which becomes instrumental in sending David to America, and to the secular success which denies all of her hopes for her son. In Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*, the mother is very much in the same pattern: it is she who attempts to organize the tenants of the filthy slum tenement in which they live in a rent strike against the landlord. It is she who supports the family after her husband has been crippled. In an apostrophe to her, Gold writes:

My humble funny little East Side mother! How can I ever forget this dark little woman with bright eyes, who hobbled about all day in bare feet, cursing in Elizabethan Yiddish, using the forbidden words "ladies" do not use, smacking us, beating us, fighting with her neighbors, helping her neighbors, busy from morn to midnight in the tenement struggle for life.

She would have stolen or killed for us. She would have let a railroad train run over her body if it could have helped us. She loved us all with the fierce painful love of a mother-wolf, and scolded us continually like a magpie.

Mother! Mother! I am still bound to you by the cords

of birth. I cannot forget you. I must remain faithful to the poor because I cannot be faithless to you! I believe in the poor because I have known you. The world must be made gracious for the poor! Momma, you taught me that!"

Perhaps the most memorable of these fierce ghetto saints is Genya, the mother in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), a woman who must defend her child against a more terrible threat than even the anti-semitic mob or the slum landlord. In Roth's novel the threat to the child comes directly from his father, a bitter, violent, paranoid man who has grown to believe that his son is not his child. In a particularly painful scene, the six year old David has accidentally bloodied a neighbor child's nose, and David's father, the wrathful God of the Hebrews, discovering a new Cain in this 6 year old, is beating him:

"I'm harboring a fiend!" the implacable voice raged. "A butcher! And you're protecting him! Those hands of his will beat me yet! I know! My blood warns me of this son! This son! Look at this child! Look what he's done. He'll shed human blood like water!"

"You're stark, raving mad!" She turned upon him angrily. "The butcher is yourself! I'll tell you that to your face! Where he's in danger I won't yield, do you understand? With everything else have your way, but not with him!"

"Hanh! you have your reasons! But I'll beat him while I can."

"You won't touch him!"

"No? We'll see about that!"

"You won't touch him, do you hear?" Her voice had become as quiet and as menacing as a trigger that, locked and at rest, held back by a hair incredible will, incredible passion. "Never!"

"You tell me that?" His voice seemed amazed. "Do you know to whom you speak?"

"It doesn't matter! And now leave us!"<sup>5</sup>

To a remarkable degree, these three Jewish mothers possess strikingly similar characteristics. Each is tender and loving, each becomes a "mother wolf" when her child is threatened, and each is remembered with wonder and love. Each, too, it should be noted, lives in a world in which the threats to the children are terribly real. They all live in poverty in worlds filled with violence and danger. One never gets the sense in reading about them that these are over-protective mothers. Quite the opposite: their protectiveness is just barely adequate to the situations in which they find themselves and their children, and not always even that.

It was in 1933, however, in Clifford Odets' first major play *Awake and Sing*, that a radical change appears in the image of the Jewish mother. The time is the Depression, and the Berger Family is making ends meet but without any conspicuous success in it. The mother, Bessie Berger, who is unquestionably the strongest character in the play, is, as well, the



strongest member of the Berger family. The others, her son and daughter, her husband and her father are bullied and lied to, alternately exhorted and screamed at and generally ruled with a kind of loving tyranny which has as its motive Bessie's realization that only as a family can they survive the Depression. The men of the family are dreamers: Ralph, the son, wants a pair of black and white shoes and romance, his father dreams of the good old days, and his grandfather, an idealistic Marxist, dreams of the Revolution to come. In this world of impractical male dreamers, the practical Bessie concerned with survival seems a familiar figure in line with that trio of heroic Jewish mothers I have already described.

However, there are significant differences which set her off from that group. Her energies, rather than being directed against any external threat, are directed against the members of her own family. In her concern for respectability at any price for her family and respect for herself, she rides roughshod over those she genuinely loves and desires to protect. Eventually, much of her power is broken, but only after she has driven her father to suicide, and her son into the arms of the class revolution. Where Gold's mother defies the landlord, Bessie Berger merely screams at the janitor, a poor, worn-out hulk of a man. The difference is illuminating: what was a meaningful act of courage in one, is merely bad temper in the other.

Odets is careful not to overweigh the scales too heavily against Bessie; he gives her long self-justifying speech in the third act:

Ralphie, I worked too hard all my years to be treated like dirt. It's no law we should be stuck together like Siamese twins. Summer shoes you didn't have, skates you never had, but I bought a new dress every week. A lover I kept—Mr. Gigolo! Did I ever play a game of cards like Mrs. Marcus? Or was Bessie Berger's children always the cleanest on the block? Here I'm not only the mother, but also the father. The first two years I worked in a stocking factory for six dollars while Myron Berger went to law school. If I didn't worry about the family who would? On the calendar it's a different place, but here without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye. Talk from now to next year—this is life in America. . . . But I'll tell you a big secret: My whole life I wanted to go away too, but with children a woman stays home. A fire burned in my heart too, but now it's too late. I'm no spring chicken. The clock goes and Bessie goes. Only my machinery can't be fixed.<sup>6</sup>

The speech rings totally true, but finally cannot redeem her in the audience's eyes. The values she has fought for, success and respectability, have led the "mother wolf" to rend her own; she herself has become the true threat to the family. What justification she has is grounded in the Great Depression. When those later, more familiar, versions of the Jewish comic Bitch-Mother appeared—Meg in Bruce Jay Friedman's *A Mother's Kisses* (1964) and Sophie in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969),

the extenuating factor of the Depression had passed. That generation of male failures created in great part by the Depression, had been followed by a generation (raised by strong Jewish mothers) that achieved relative affluence and left the ghetto. The old maternal characteristics, however, remained constant: the fierce protectiveness, the self-sacrifice, the total immersion into the household roles of mother and wife. All the stances and stratagems for survival developed over generations in a hostile Christian Europe, and more recently proven viable in the American ghetto, were still there, but in affluent suburbia they had become anachronisms. The protectiveness was merely smothering, the self-sacrifice became grotesque self-indulgence, the concern with serving the child came to be replaced by the need to preserve the child as child—so that the mother's role, the only role sanctioned by Jewish tradition, could continue to have meaning. David Levinsky's mother died a martyr at the hands of the Russian hooligans who had beaten her son; if she had survived, she would have been reduced to the comic martyrdom of the rejected Jewish mother in affluent America.

Her son, unable to be accepted or to accept his American-ness without rejecting some part of his Jewishness, would learn that even a partial rejection of his ethnic identity involved a degree of rejection of the mother with whom it was so profoundly identified. He would leave that mother and enter America to create the Alka-Seltzer commercial, Rhoda's mother and of course, the Jewish-American novel.

His mother immured in the only role she had been allowed to assume, would remain behind committed by history and tradition to the ghetto of her life.

Southern Illinois University

### footnotes

1. Henry Roth, *Call it Sleep* (New York, 1934), in reprinted edition (1960), 71.
2. Jo Sinclair, *Wasteland* (New York, 1946), 35.
3. The Polish immigrant found in his parish church an institution which served to mediate between the demands of his European past and his American present, as well as to create a bond between himself and his immigrant compatriots. Further, the parish school functioned to familiarize the children of the community with the language, religion and culture of their parents and to inculcate respect for their traditional values, thus averting many of those familial estrangements created by the public schools for the Jewish immigrant. (cf. William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York, 1958), V. II, 1523, ff.) In addition, the church provided a traditional institution that accompanied the immigrant as he became Americanized. The church of the new "American" neighborhood retained the same form as that of the immigrant neighborhood, and though the services might be conducted in English, the liturgy, the vestments and the rituals remained the same. (Cf. Humberto Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago 1880-1930* (New York, 1970), 199.)
4. Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York, 1930), 112-113.
5. *Call It Sleep*, 85.
6. Clifford Odets, *Awake and Sing in Six Plays of Clifford Odets* (New York, 1939), 95.