

“Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of Nineteenth Century America: Jewish Immigrants: The Promise of a New Life.” National Museum of American History, The Mall, Washington, D.C., 2001. Temporary exhibition, February 1999–2004. 1,100 sq. ft. Susan H. Myers, curator; Stephen Fisher, designer; Jonathan D. Sarna, Hasia Diner, Grace Cohen Grossman, and Stanley Chyet, advisors.
Susan H. Myers. *The Promise of a New Life: Jewish Immigrants in America, 1820–1880*. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American History), 77 pp.

As the twentieth century was coming to a close, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History on the Mall in Washington mounted an exhibition highlighting aspects of class, race, and ethnicity in the decades before and after the Civil War. “Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of Nineteenth Century America” focuses on three very different communities: factory workers and owners in Bridgeport, Connecticut; African Americans in the South Carolina low country; and Jewish immigrants in Cincinnati.

Without in any way denigrating the first two, this review will, understandably, restrict itself to the Jewish exhibition, and to the excellent book, more than an exhibition catalogue, written by the curator of that segment, Susan H. Myers, who holds the C. Malcolm Watkins Curatorial Chair at the museum and heads its division of social history.

The scope of the handsome, oversize, profusely illustrated book, both replicates much of the exhibition and supplements it. A brief eight-page introduction about immigration is followed by thirty-one pages on Jewish immigration to America. These provide a useful context for the twenty-seven pages on “Cincinnati, Ohio: ‘A sort of paradise for the Hebrew,’” which form the core of the book. There is a one-page “Afterword: An American Success Story.” Endnotes are provided but there is no bibliography. There are also—librarians take note—eight transparent envelopes tipped in or pasted on containing removable facsimile paper artifacts, including a baggage check from New York’s Castle Garden immigrant depot; a “Lady’s Introductory Ticket” to a “Purim Masquerade Ball” of 1882; and a \$250 stock certificate in the Phoenix, a Jewish Men’s Club in Cincinnati.

The Jewish life that is pictured is largely a bourgeois life, concentrating on those “who began with little capital” (75) and paying

little heed to those whose only capital was their labor. The one Jewish person depicted who was a worker, the immigrant glazier Louis Stix, became a dry-goods merchant in Cincinnati (22). The only persons shown actually working are South Carolina millhands employed by a Jewish-owned firm.

To be sure, Jewish Cincinnati with its largely Rhenish and Bohemian roots, was highly entrepreneurial, and museums, with their dependence on material culture, tend to privilege those whose possessions survive. Poor folks don't commission portraits, and one of the strong points of both the exhibition and the book are the painted and photographic representations of a number of Jewish Cincinnatians, including its two most prominent nineteenth-century rabbis, Isaac Mayer Wise and Max Lilienthal.

There is an impressive treatment of Judaism, including such personal ritual items as a *tallit* (prayer shawl), and phylacteries, the latter donated by the founder of this journal. Many other Cincinnatians also loaned appropriate artifacts, as did the American Jewish Archives and several other Jewish institutions. There is also a facsimile of a front page of Wise's weekly, *The Israelite*, and views of the exterior and the interior of the wonderfully ornate Plum Street Temple. Impressive in the book, the illuminated interior in the exhibition is stunning.

Both the book and the exhibition are most worthwhile and represent a significant contribution to public understanding. It would be useful if the exhibition were to travel to Cincinnati and other appropriate venues, where it could be supplemented by items from local collections and be the occasion for lectures on local Jewish history.

Roger Daniels is Charles Phelps Taft Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Cincinnati. His most recent book is Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants Since 1882 (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).