

Robert Perlman, *From Shtetl to Milltown: Litvaks, Hungarians, and Galizianers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1925* (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 2001), xii + 123 pp. Illus.

Robert Perlman has carved out his own niche in the writing of American Jewish history – he is the expert on Hungarian Jews in the United States. He has followed his book, *Bridging Three Worlds: Hungarian Jewish Americans, 1848-1914* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991) with the present volume.

McKeesport, Pennsylvania, is the milltown of the title. It has always been viewed as a Hungarian Jewish enclave by the Jews of Western Pennsylvania. There are jokes about how Hungarian Jews pronounce the town's name, with the accent on the first syllable, as in Hungarian. Perlman's subtitle adds Litvaks and Galizianers to the mélange of Jewish residents (omitting an important element – Jews from Ukraine are usually called "Russian" Jews) but the main actors are Hungarians.

Perlman has organized his book chronologically and by theme. The first two chapters deal with the origins of Jews in the milltowns of Western Pennsylvania, excluding the cities of Pittsburgh and Johnstown. That is because "the story of Jewish immigrants in [the latter city]... has been carefully researched by Ewa Morawaska." (xi) As for Pittsburgh, the history of its Jews "has been written..." (ibid.) In fact, there is no scholarly history of the Jews of Pittsburgh as yet, only two oral histories and some theses and articles.

The other milltowns Perlman investigated are Ambridge and Donora, with occasional references to other places. In researching the origins of his subjects, Perlman traveled to Hungary, Slovakia, and Ukraine to look at synagogue and census records. "This proved futile..." (xii) but he was able to use U.S. census records and listed them in his appendix.

Succeeding chapters deal with life and work in America. Perlman asks why these Jews settled in small towns rather than the big cities where the majority of Jewish immigrants made their homes. His response is that "Without doubt... the most compelling explanation of why people chose to go to a particular town was the fact that they

knew someone who was already there. There are myriad instances of this pattern of ‘chain migration’...”(34)

In one table, Perlman shows that the 1910-20 occupations of Jews in four Western Pennsylvania towns differ drastically from those of non-Jews. Most were self-employed in trade, a smaller percentage were commercial employees and professionals, and only a small percentage were employed in manufacturing. Non-Jews were overwhelmingly engaged in manufacturing. It is obvious that even in McKeesport, where a larger percentage of Jews were employed in the mills than elsewhere, they preferred to be self-employed. There are several reasons offered for Jews not being employed in large numbers in the mills, such as antisemitism and not being allowed to observe the Sabbath. In McKeesport Hungarian Jews were seen as “Honkies,” that is, Hungarians rather than Jews, and were hired in larger numbers. “The phenomenon of Jewish workers in heavy industry in McKeesport – which seemed at the outset of this study to be so unusual as to constitute an anomaly – turned out to be just that. It proved to be an aberration that did not last.” (98)

The Jewish artisans, peddlers, and storekeepers in McKeesport and the other milltowns in Western Pennsylvania had an important advantage over other immigrants. They were usually literate, knew about handling money, and were familiar with the many East European languages spoken around them, including Hungarian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian. They also spoke “Slavish,” an American linguistic phenomenon, with jargon based on the common roots of various Slavic languages that became a kind of lingua franca in Western Pennsylvania.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is chapter 3, “The early years in America.” Using oral histories, unpublished memoirs and theses, and histories published between 1893 and 1996, as well as basic raw materials such as the Pennsylvania ledgers in the R.G. Dun & Co. Collection at the Harvard Graduate School of Business, Perlman is able to present a multifaceted description of why Jews settled where they did.

Chapter 4, “One family’s story: the Spiegels,” is a delightful interlude. Based on Perlman’s interviews with members of the Spiegel

family, as well as taped oral histories, it describes the place of origin of the family, how it made a living, and how and why eight of the nine siblings left to settle in the McKeesport area. “It was a complex web connected by marriages, business relationships, and by mutual giving and taking of help and support.” (45-46) However, as is true for so many American Jews, “the dark side of history also intrudes.” (47) There was a ninth sibling, Avraham, who perished in the Holocaust along with his family. Perlman concludes this chapter by noting the rapid upward mobility of the American-born generation.

In succeeding chapters Perlman deals with Jewish immigrants’ adjustment to American life and the growth and decline of the percentage of Jews in the milltowns he investigated. He concludes, “The Jewish populations in the milltowns dwindled, the stores closed, membership in the synagogues and Jewish organizations declined, and people moved to other towns or to Pittsburgh.” (100)

While Orthodox synagogues in the other small towns mentioned by Perlman became Conservative or Reform or have disappeared altogether, Gemilas Chesed, founded in 1886, is still “a citadel of Orthodoxy.” (91) It is now located in neighboring White Oak (walking distance from McKeesport). The Reform temple B’nai Israel has also moved to White Oak. There is even a new infusion of Orthodox Jewish life with the establishment of the Mesivta of Greater Pittsburgh (boys’ religious high school) in White Oak.

There are a few minor errors: “me’hutza” (68) should be mehitsa; “shnoodered” (69) is a pejorative term combining the Yiddish “shnorn” to beg with the Hebrew “neder” vow; “Arbeiter Verein” should be “Arbeiter Ring” (90); publication information on Lee Shai Weissbach’s article listed in the bibliography is missing. (109) One of the most important institutions in Jewish life, the mikve (ritual bath), is mentioned only once, on page eighty-five. McKeesport was known for many years as the site of the only kosher mikve between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. The most famous Jew of McKeesport origin, Sophie Irene Loeb, is not mentioned, although her brother is noted in passing.

Perlman has made a major contribution to the study of how and why Jews came to America’s milltowns. The pages of maps and photographs, the statistics, the comprehensive bibliography,

index, and notes, as well as the many anecdotes included in the text, integrate serious scholarship with lively human interest material. This book is highly recommended for historians of the American Jewish experience and for the descendants of Jewish immigrants, Hungarians, Galizianers, Litvaks, et al.

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