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America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism (review)

Steve Feinstein

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Troubled Memory offers important insights about the psychosocial impact of trauma. For instance, the author observes that sharing traumatic experiences with others “enables victims to reconstruct repressed memory, mourn loss, and master helplessness.” Further, there must be a community willing to listen and be transformed by hearing the survivor bear witness. As Elie Wiesel observes, “To listen to a witness is to become a witness.” Powell cites Primo Levi’s dictum that survivors have the “awful privilege” of acquainting the world with radical evil. Yet for all the author’s wisdom and subtlety, he appears to have overlooked the normative dimension of memory in the Jewish tradition. Biblically based, memory defines the Jewish people. “If we stop remembering,” attests Wiesel, “we stop being.” Memory and bearing witness transcend the pre-Holocaust distinction between the religious and the secular.

American Fuehrer and *Troubled Memory* help readers understand a dark but persistent undercurrent in American political life. Moreover, these works constitute an important midrash on contemporary events as antisemitism re-emerges as a global phenomenon. Now as in the early 1930s disquieting signs indicate that this phenomenon is based upon ideology rather than economics. Victories over this millennial pathology appear temporary at best. Rockwell’s assassination did not cut short the development of the American ultra-right, nor did Duke’s loss at the polls. Many Americans believe that the potential for antisemitism is limited in their country, but the rise of the Christian identity movement and the continued activity of Holocaust deniers demonstrate that it remains a permanent fringe. Adherents of the far right have condemned Simonelli’s work as unfair to Rockwell. There will, of course, always be a lunatic fringe in politics. Mendacity is tenacious.

Alan L. Berger

Florida Atlantic University

***America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*, Gulie Ne’eman Arad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 327 pp., notes, bibl, index, \$35.00.**

Gulie Arad addresses the sometimes provocative question of how American Jews reacted to the rise of Nazism. Rather than examining that response within the time frame of the twentieth century, her monograph begins at the time of the Damascus Blood Libel of 1840, an international scandal that the author believes brought American Jewry, with a population of 15,000, “to constitute, however loosely, a community” (p. 4). The study ends in 1942, when the U.S. confirmed the genocide (minus the word), and when the possibility of rescue, and even the influence to get policy-makers to consider it, were minimal. Her conclusion accords with William Rubenstein’s thesis that after 1942 nothing could be done because of the German prohibition against emigration and because of the interference of the war. Arad focuses on the role of American Jewish bystanders to the Shoah, whom she sees as impotent.

Arad does not discuss “what might have been,” a theme in discussions of on-lookers, especially from the secure shores of the United States. She asserts that condi-

tions in Germany in 1933 were, in fact, so new that American Jews had no historical reference point for an adequate response. While the U.S. rescued many Jews, the country did not always fill its immigration quotas. When personalities enter the picture, Arad focuses on those with access to people in power, to President Roosevelt in particular.

The author looks to mid-nineteenth-century events to suggest how insecure the American Jewish self-image was before the twentieth century. She cites various bilateral treaties in which the U.S. acknowledged the right of European countries to apply to American Jewish visitors the same restrictions applied to their own Jewish citizens; to the Edgar Mortara Affair of 1858, involving the Vatican's kidnapping of a baptized Jewish child; and to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's Order Number 11 of 1862 excluding Jews "as a class" from working in his area of control. However, if Arad cites Grant's order to suggest Jewish impotence as a community, contrary evidence exists, for example in the success of a December 29, 1862 letter of protest (not mentioned in the book) from members of the Jewish community of Paducah, Kentucky to President Lincoln. Though not an organized community response, the letter shows that Jews collectively felt "greatly insulted and outraged by this inhuman order, the carrying out of which would be the grossest violation of the Constitution and our rights as good citizens under it, and would place us, besides a large number of other Jewish families of this town, as outlaws before the whole world."¹ As Arad indicates, Lincoln rescinded Grant's order.

Arad suggests that a real "Jewish community" came to exist in America once the Polish and Russian—and later Eastern European—immigration began. The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, a watershed, led to a meeting between a Jewish delegation and President Theodore Roosevelt, who subsequently sent a petition to the Russian government. In 1907 U.S. diplomats again interceded with Russia because of a recent Russian addendum to the Russian-American Commercial Treaty of 1832 that virtually excluded American Jews from admission into the Russian Empire. The ensuing debate involved the American-Jewish community in presidential politics. The 1911–13 Mendel Beilis Trial in Kiev, and other human rights violations finally led the U.S. House of Representatives to abrogate this treaty in 1913, marking "a uniquely successful episode in American-Jewish politics" (p. 45).

The 1920s, however, saw a rise of both nativism and antisemitism in the U.S., highlighted by the Immigration Act of 1921 and by Henry Ford's diatribes, which weakened the Jewish community's position. Arad suggests that while in this state American Jewry "was summoned to [the] unprecedented task" (p. 70) of countering the rise of Nazism in Germany. By 1925, however, another undercurrent—disinterest among American Jewry—had emerged, something Rabbi Stephen Wise called "indifference . . . to the welfare of world Jewry" (p. 78). Furthermore, given the scale of the economic depression, by 1930 the problems of Jews in Germany seemed less pressing. But Arad asserts that the real reason for American Jews' limited response was that "Hitler and Nazism were simply not taken seriously" (p. 87). Arad discusses a Novem-

ber 1930 report by Morris Waldman of the American Jewish Committee about the situation in Germany. Not widely known, this report to American Jewish leaders predicted a deteriorating situation for Jews.

Thus, Arad claims that during the period 1930–1942 most American Jews were listless, ignorant of Nazi racial ideas, and disunited in their visions of a solution. In addition, national interests articulated by government officials seemed to conflict with Jewish concerns. Arad paints a portrait of organizational leadership—such as the American Jewish Committee—becoming disenchanted with its followers, who seemed to think that German Jews could somehow save themselves. This view prevailed despite reports such as that by Rabbi Jonah B. Wise of the Joint Distribution Committee concluding that “the conditions of the Jews [in Germany] were hopeless” (p. 110).

Rabbi Stephen Wise emerged as the major spokesman for American Jewry. Wise organized rallies and tried to influence high-ranking Jews in the administration, fifteen percent of appointments according to Arad’s calculations. Wise, however, received little help from these individuals. Arad further indicates that Roosevelt’s Jewish advisors—led by Louis D. Brandeis, Felix Frankfurter, Herbert H. Lehman, and Samuel Rosenman—“in effect functioned as a defense cordon,” blocking other Jewish leaders who might have pleaded the case of German Jewry (p. 138).

Arad also deals with the issue of immigration, but finds that American Jews had little interest in it. No one staged protests when it was restricted by executive order of Hoover in September 1930; instead, numbers of American Jews voiced concerns about more of their German counterparts coming to American shores. But Wise remained an unrelenting if frustrated spokesman for the Jewish cause. There was, however, a political basis for Wise’s ineffectiveness. The author points out that in 1932, before Roosevelt secured the Presidential nomination, Wise had campaigned against him and called him “a man of no moral courage whatsoever and of no political integrity” (p. 166). Wise’s first meeting with Roosevelt occurred only on January 11, 1936. The relationship, according to Arad, was not good, and by 1937 Wise was “facing the bitter truth about his powerlessness” (p. 195) to obtain a strong statement from FDR in defense of German Jews.

Underlying the issue lay the problem of American antisemitism and the fear that Jewish minority might be seen by the American masses as potentially disloyal. Thus American Jewry responded anemically to the Nuremberg Laws (1935), the Evian Conference (1938), Kristallnacht (1938), and the SS *St. Louis* episode (1939). Once the war in Europe started, even less could be done.

On August 28, 1942, Wise received the pessimistic Riegner Telegram, providing new confirmation of the character of the “Final Solution” currently underway. Other harrowing reports from Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles followed. Wise agreed to keep much information on the annihilation of the Jews secret (for political reasons that cannot be addressed here), and only in December 1942 did he ask for another meeting with Roosevelt—three months after the Riegner report. In response, Roosevelt reissued a statement from the July 1942 Madison Square Garden rally con-

demning Nazi outrages in general, but not those against Jews in particular. Wise discerned a breakthrough and began to think more highly of the President.

Arad links the failures of American Jewry to their experience with Americanization, which “played a more powerful role in determining American Jewry’s response to the atrocities in Europe than the events themselves” (p. 222). Her book offers substantial detail and analysis, and is especially good on the politics of the Roosevelt administration and the rivalries among Jewish groups seeking access to the President. She demonstrates that the pre-1945 American-Jewish community was quite different than the one that emerged later; it had little self-confidence, a frustrated leadership, and only indirect avenues to political influence.

Too much of Arad’s book deals with American-Jewish history between 1840 and 1913. Although this illustrates the formation of Jewish community values and political positions, summarizing the information briefly would have left more space for such significant incidents of the 1930s as the *St. Louis* Affair (which reflected many more nuances of U.S.-Cuban diplomacy than the author suggests). In the author’s opinion the Zionist movement in the U.S. and elsewhere offered no counterbalance to the ineffectiveness of mainstream American Jews. Tom Segev’s *The Seventh Million* has also diagrammed the failure of Zionism to engage in any significant rescue. Together, Arad and Segev’s monographs paint a terribly pessimistic picture of initiatives for rescue, and stand as a significant indictment of Jews (as well as non-Jews) as observers of the Holocaust.

Note

1. Letter to Abraham Lincoln, December 29, 1862, from D. Wolff & Bros., C. F. Kaskell, and J. W. Kaswell in *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, vol. 17, part II, p. 506.

Stephen C. Feinstein

University of Minnesota

***The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*, Elazar Barkan (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), xli + 418 pp., cloth \$29.95, pbk. \$18.95.**

One of the most dramatic—and wholly unexpected—events in the aftermath of the Holocaust has been the recent success in having European governments and corporations pay restitution for unjust financial activities carried out before and during World War II. As a result of the \$1.25 billion agreement with Swiss banks in August 1998, the newly revived Holocaust restitution movement expanded to other Nazi-era wrongs, including German and Austrian corporations’ use of slave labor; European insurance companies’ failure to pay policies belonging to Holocaust victims; French, British, and American banks’ roles in the “Aryanization” of accounts in their branches located in Nazi-occupied Europe; and the possession of stolen art by museums worldwide.

In December 1999, German firms and the government agreed to pay ten billion