



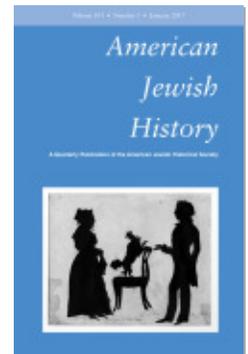
PROJECT MUSE®

Roth in the Archives: 'Eli, the Fanatic' and the Nitra
Yeshiva Controversy of 1948

Julian Levinson

American Jewish History, Volume 101, Number 1, January 2017, pp. 57-79
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2017.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/645162>

Roth in the Archives: ‘Eli, the Fanatic’ and the Nitra Yeshiva Controversy of 1948

JULIAN LEVINSON

To take what there *is*, and use it... to dig deep into the actual and get something out of *that* ...

Henry James, notebook entry, London, May 12, 1889

A special fascination has hovered around Philip Roth’s short story “Eli, the Fanatic” since it appeared in *Commentary* magazine in 1958. An account of a lawyer who descends into madness while working to reconcile a group of Holocaust survivors with their Americanized Jewish neighbors, Roth’s text has been celebrated for its shrewd social commentary and parable-like density (one critic has called it a “medieval morality play”).¹ Scholars have focused on multiple aspects of the text—its insights into the psychic fallout of assimilation, its use of the doppelgänger motif, its running parody of psychoanalysis, and more.² But one fact about “Eli, the Fanatic” has almost entirely eluded critics—that its basic scenario is drawn from an actual episode that occurred in 1948 in Mount Kisco, New York. Indeed, in the same year that Roth’s story takes place and in a town identical to his fictitious town of Woodenton, New York, a zoning controversy erupted that bears an unmistakable resemblance to the events of “Eli, the Fanatic.” As in the story, a group of Holocaust survivors sought to establish a yeshiva in an old mansion they had purchased; local residents complained that the school was out of character with the neighborhood; and a legal drama erupted that exposed the town’s class, ethnic, and religious tensions.³

1. Alan Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: Suny Press, 1996): 38.

2. See inter alia Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (London: Methuen, 1982) 47–50; Shuyu Lee, “Communal Identity and Individual Difference: Truth and Faciality in Philip Roth’s ‘Eli, the Fanatic’” *Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, number 4, volume 2, 2011, 91–113; and Aimee Pozorski, “Akedah, the Holocaust, and the Limits of the Law in Roth’s ‘Eli, the Fanatic’” *Comparative Literature and Culture*, number 16, volume 2, (June 2014); and Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* (Bloomsbury, 2015) 13–35.

3. Connections between the Nitra Yeshiva controversy and “Eli, the Fanatic” have been noted in two footnotes: see Baila R. Shargel and Harold L. Drimmer, *The Jews of Westchester: A Social History* (Purple Mountain Press, 1994); and Benjamin Balint, *Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2010) 231. The only comprehensive effort to address this matter is Steven Fink, “Fact, Fiction, and History in Philip Roth’s ‘Eli, the Fanatic,’” *Melus*, volume 29, number 3 (Fall, 2014): 89–111. Fink’s article appeared too late to be included in the present article.

Though largely neglected by American Jewish historians, this episode gained some notoriety at the time, receiving coverage in the *New York Times* and in *Commentary*, while also sparking the imagination of an aspiring writer from Newark with a taste for controversy, who seized upon the basic scenario to create one of the earliest literary works about Holocaust survivors on American soil. As it turns out, then, the Mount Kisco zoning controversy of 1948 *has* remained in the public awareness (at least among readers of Roth), though in the guise of fiction rather than as historical fact.

What difference does it make to read “Eli, the Fanatic” in relation to this historical event, the Jamesian *donnée* that evidently inspired Roth? To explore this question, I draw on journalistic accounts, letters to local newspapers, personal correspondence, documents from the American Jewish Committee (AJC) archives, and New Castle town records to reconstruct the Nitra Yeshiva controversy of 1947–1948. Beyond the intrinsic interest created by this episode and beyond the antiquarian interest aroused by its more-than-apparent connection with Roth’s story, this exercise raises pertinent questions in the context of the recent “archival turn” in literary studies.⁴ There are, to begin with, questions intrinsic to any act of annotation: How thick an account of the surrounding context should we provide when glossing a text that is evidently a canny mixture of documentation and invention? How do we account for divergences between the story and the actual historical events? How do we interpret moments in the text that seem deliberately to work against the historical record?

We can also expand our inquiry by considering anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler’s claim that the archival turn in the humanities reflects a turn “from the archive-as-source to the archive-as-subject.”⁵ Here, we begin

4. The “turn to the archive” is a much-discussed phenomenon in a variety of disciplines. An important point of reference in this development is Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Works that exemplify this trend include Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013). See also the special issue on “the Archive” in *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (4), (November 1998).

5. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Stoler elaborates on this distinction as follows: “One could argue that ‘the archive’ for historians and ‘the Archive’ for cultural theorists have been wholly different analytical objects: for the former, a body of documents and the institutions that house them, for the latter, a metaphoric invocation for any corpus of selective collections and the longings that the acquisitive quest for the primary, originary, and untouched entail” (45).

to broach meta-questions about the aims and limits of archival work in relation to literary analysis, about what can and should count as an archive and how and to what effects it can be used. From this perspective, Roth's text becomes one among a collection of multiple documents in a broader web of discourse surrounding the yeshiva controversy. New questions include the following: What specific role(s) can we allocate to a literary text—with its embellishments, implicit and explicit intertextuality, hypothetical scenarios, reworkings, and distortions—in relation to other sorts of documents written for different purposes? What do we do with materials that the author did not have access to, such as, in this case, the prehistory of the yeshiva or the behind-the-scenes machinations during the controversy? And, finally, are there ethical concerns that impinge on the choice to use historical materials, and are these heightened, as philosopher Berel Lang and others have argued, when these materials touch on the Holocaust?⁶ The complexity of such questions is compounded in the case of “Eli, the Fanatic,” I will argue, because there is good reason to believe that Roth *thought* he was rearranging the actual facts of the case, while an obscure personal letter suggests that he was closer to the truth than he may have realized. As it turns out, Roth's fiction may be closer to the truth than the “non-fictional” accounts that Roth seems to have relied upon, and yet the power of “Eli, the Fanatic” may depend to some extent on its being read as fiction and not fact.

I. Backgrounds to the Controversy

Let us begin by recalling the outline of Roth's story. When a collection of Jewish refugees establishes a school in the Westchester town of “Woodenton,” local Jews are alarmed at the appearance of Old World Jews in manicured suburbia, and they send in the (Jewish) lawyer Eli Peck to urge them to leave. In the course of exchanges with his distressed pregnant wife at home and with the yeshiva leader at the school, Eli becomes psychically unhinged and shifts his allegiance to the refugees. In an effort to protect the refugees by masking their foreignness, he gives his own suit to one of the yeshiva teachers, referred to as “the DP,” or “the greenie.” When the greenie unaccountably leaves his own old black suit for Eli, Eli puts it on and confronts the greenie in a mysterious exchange during which Eli has the “strange notion that he was two people.”⁷ He then makes his way through town in an altered state

6. See Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

7. Philip Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic.” In *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) 298. Subsequent citations will be in the text.

of mind, dressed in the clothes of the DP and greeting passersby with “Sholom.” In the final scene, Eli greets his newborn son in the hospital just as he is administered a tranquilizer that cannot, however, “touch [his soul] down where the blackness had reached” (298). Thus, by the end of the story, in what is either a fit of insanity or an assertion of heroic moral choice (or a combination of the two), Eli has seemingly merged his identity with that of the scorned refugee. The focus of the story, it bears emphasizing, is not on the refugees themselves, neither their reactions to the ordeal nor the ultimate fate of their school, but on the Jewish lawyer Eli, whose transformation into a lunatic or a prophet or a quasi *ba'al t'shuvah* (literally, “master of repentance,” or one who returns to Torah) completes itself by the conclusion of the story’s arc.

The episode behind “Eli, the Fanatic” can be seen as part of the larger history of the Nitra Yeshiva, which flourished in prewar Hungary before its members were dispersed or murdered during the Holocaust. Standard accounts of modern Jewish history rarely consider the specific histories of different yeshivas, so to glean the history of the Nitra Yeshiva, it is necessary to rely largely on “insider” accounts.⁸ My reconstruction culls information from sources that Roth could not have known, but which might be considered part of a broader archive surrounding this episode. The Nitra Yeshiva was, by the mid-1930s, one of the jewels in the crown of Hungarian Judaism, home to approximately three hundred students from regions stretching from Germany to Romania.⁹ Conforming to the Talmud-centered pedagogy associated with the ultra-Orthodoxy of Chatam Sofer and his disciples, the school trained a number of students who eventually served as local rabbis throughout Hungary. It should be noted at the outset that while the criticism on “Eli, the Fanatic” tends to identify the Orthodox figures as Hasidim, the history we are tracing concerned a group of determinedly non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews.¹⁰ This scholarly tendency reflects a common slippage in the American vernacular, whereby all ultra-Orthodox Jews get categorized under the heading of “Hasidim,” and this has undoubtedly influenced the reception of the story. While Roth himself was evidently unconcerned by such distinc-

8. The most comprehensive source on the Nitra Yeshiva available in English is Abraham Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry: The Gripping Story of Rabbi Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandl, the Valiant Holocaust Leader Who Battled Both Allied Indifference and Nazi Hatred* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1984).

9. For a useful chapter on Hungarian Orthodoxy, of which the Nitra Yeshiva was a part, see Michael Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, edited by Jack Wertheimer (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992).

10. This misidentification is ubiquitous. See, for example, Samuel Freedman, “Philip Roth and the Great American Nightmare” *Azure*, Spring, 2005.

tions when he wrote the story, the association of “Eli, the Fanatic” with Hasidim has tended to activate sentimental associations with Hasidism in general.¹¹ (One might note that the spread of the Chabad Lubavitch form of Hasidism since the 1970s and the naturalization of Hasidim in the public sphere has made it that much more difficult to recover the dynamics of the original controversy.)

A key figure in the history of the Nitra Yeshiva during and after World War II was Rabbi Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandel (1903–1957). It was he who emerged as the de facto leader of the yeshiva after the war, and it was he who shepherded its surviving members to their new home in the United States. Born in Debrecen, Hungary (today, part of Slovakia), Weissmandel was a product of the yeshivas at Sered and Tirnoy before associating himself in 1931 with the Nitra Yeshiva, where he married Bracha Rachel, daughter of the head of the yeshiva (Shmuel Dovid Ungar).¹² Despite the internal focus of the yeshiva, Weissmandel’s scholarly activities brought him into the secular world. Throughout the 1930s, he spent time at the Hebrew collection at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, researching textual variants among rabbinic manuscripts in an effort to publish a new prayer book and other materials for Nitra Yeshiva students. He also traveled to Palestine to a meeting of the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) political party Agudas Yisroel, an experience that did nothing to mitigate his ambivalence about the Zionist project, which would deepen over the years.

Weissmandel’s activities were interrupted by the outbreak of the war, which transformed him into a modern-day *shtadlan*, an intercessor on behalf of Jewish political affairs. In the early months of the war, Weissmandel used his connections in England to arrange meetings with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the British foreign minister, from whom he obtained visas for sixty rabbis to enter England. When deportations from Slovakian towns to Auschwitz began in the spring of 1942, he joined an underground organization comprised of religious and secular Jews known as the “Working Group,” which sought to save Jewish lives by bribing Nazi officials and smuggling Jews into Hungary.¹³ Be-

11. For the sentimentalizing of Orthodoxy in the reception of “Eli, the Fanatic,” see Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Resisting Allegory: Or, Reading ‘Eli, the Fanatic’ in Tel Aviv” *Prooftexts* 21, number 1 (2001): 103–112.

12. This account of Weissmandel’s life draws on Fuchs, *The Unbeeded Cry*; Herry-mon Maurer, “The Yeshiva Comes to Westchester: The Legalistic Hedges of Suburbia,” *Commentary* magazine, 1949, 319–330; and Dina Porat’s entry on Weissmandel in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Weissmandel_Mikhael_Dov_Ber.

13. See Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale?: Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 74–81.

tween 1942 and 1944, he spearheaded the ambitious “Europa Plan,” which sought to raise huge sums of money to ransom Slovakian Jews. Despite hundreds of letters Weissmandel and his team sent to Jewish and non-Jewish leaders around the world describing the death camps, the plan foundered, leaving Weissmandel embittered—especially toward the Zionist leadership in Palestine and organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.¹⁴ Weissmandel thus emerged in the war years as a leader who worked tirelessly on behalf of Jewish communities throughout Central Europe, while railing against signs of global indifference toward endangered Jews. While Yehuda Bauer and other historians have debated the efficacy of his work, all agree that he represents an important example of Jewish resistance strategies during the Holocaust.¹⁵

Toward the end of 1944, Weissmandel was deported to Auschwitz along with his family, though he saved his life, in a singularly daring act, by jumping from a moving train. In the spring of 1945, he returned to the Nitra Yeshiva to discover some seventy former students, all of them survivors of the camps between the ages of 14 and 21. Aided by former students from the yeshiva, they relocated en masse to the United States, joining a wave of postwar immigration that would bring one hundred and forty thousand Jewish displaced persons (DPs) to the United States in the postwar years. As Beth Cohen shows in *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (2008), the initial experiences of survivors in the United States frequently belied the triumphant narratives promoted at the time by the media.¹⁶ Variouslly called “refugees,” “DPs,” “New Americans,” “greeners,” and “units” (as in “family units”), these Jews faced a bewildering web of social service and job placement agencies and a cultural ethos that valued quick success and social mobility. The agencies they dealt with often failed to register the traumatic experiences undergone by these newcomers: They were generally regarded as new Americans, *not* as survivors of genocide. The Jewish community became

14. Throughout the postwar years, he remained an outspoken critic of all forms of Jewish secularism and Zionism in particular. In a posthumous collection of his writings, *Min HaMetzar*, Weissmandel issues a bitter condemnation of unobservant Jews: “Let it be clearly understood that never in Jewish history (even in the time of Jeroboam or Achav) have such hostile atheists stood at the helm of the Jewish people as today.” (Weissmandel, Chaim Michael Dov, *Min HaMetzar* [Jerusalem, 1960].) These words locate Weissmandel squarely in the tradition of religious anti-Zionism associated with Satmar Hasidism and the Neturei Karta. Needless to say, his bitter tone here reveals an entirely different persona than the one that spoke up for the yeshiva’s right to exist.

15. Bauer, 74–80.

16. Beth Cohen, *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

their de facto sponsors, but, here as well, Cohen argues, the reception was often less sympathetic than one might have wished in retrospect. Weissmandel and his group were somewhat anomalous in this general trend, since they could rely on a network of former members of the Nitra Yeshiva who had already settled in America. As we will see, after an initial period of conflict, their story can ultimately be seen as a largely successful example of American relocation.

II. The Controversy in Mount Kisco

When Weissmandel arrived in the United States in 1947 along with the surviving members of the Nitra Yeshiva, he set about trying to recreate a yeshiva-style community on American soil. For nearly a year, Weissmandel sought a suitable property in the New York area, before obtaining a 254-acre estate in Mount Kisco, New York, Westchester County, formerly the property of Robert S. Brewster, a cultivator of rare flowers. Eighty percent of the Mount Kisco property was wooded; the rest contained a forty-room main building, outbuildings with an additional thirty rooms, a swimming pool, and tennis courts. From the 1930s onward, the market for what were termed “millionaires’ properties” had been rapidly diminishing. Outsized Westchester estates of this sort were being increasingly sold off and subdivided for suburban homes—a sign of a broader shift in class dynamics in suburban Westchester that brought a rising white-collar middle class, including upwardly mobile Jewish professionals, into regions previously associated strictly with old money.¹⁷ The Brewster estate had been on the market for seven years with no buyers; with the price lowered to \$100,000, it was purchased for Weissmandel and his students with help from Rabbi Leo Jung of the Jewish Center Synagogue and Alvin Johnson of the New School for Social Research.

Having obtained the Brewster estate, Weissmandel hoped to recreate the Nitra Yeshiva and to use the extra land for dairy and chicken farming to enable the school to be as self-sustaining as possible. He was assured that tax exemptions protecting schools with a “monastic character” (and enjoyed by a Catholic school in the neighboring village) would apply to them as well. A few months after the students arrived in March of 1948, however, the yeshiva was deluged with threats from various directions: the New Castle County Board of Health cited inadequate water and sewage provisions; local merchants complained of delinquent bills; and

17. Baila Round Shargel and Harold L. Drimmer, *Jews of Westchester: A Social History* (New York: Purple Mountain Press, 1994), 133.

the building inspector from the town of New Castle identified possible breaches in zoning regulations, citing township ordinances limiting most residences to one-family homes. While it is unclear who initiated these letters, Weissmandel was clearly in hot water, and he retained an attorney, William Gallagher, from the White Plains firm of Clark and Gallagher. The case of the “Yeshiva Farm Settlement” was presented at a meeting of the New Castle Zoning Board of Appeals in September of 1948.

An unexpectedly vocal group of local residents attended the meeting, expressing fears of increased tax burdens and decreased property values, adding that the school disrupted the “harmony of the neighborhood,” which consisted of large private homes.¹⁸ Some appeared uncomfortable with the very presence of Jewish refugees, and Orthodox ones at that, in a Westchester suburb. The American Jewish Committee later reported “unfortunate overtones” at the hearing; another report mentioned an outburst by a real estate broker who accused the yeshiva of “bringing their ghetto with them and establishing it in the heart of aristocratic Westchester.”¹⁹ In the face of this opposition, the zoning board postponed its decision for nearly two months.

During this hiatus, the opposition refined its position, removing traces of outright prejudice from its rhetoric. The opposition appealed to the zoning board in the form of a written document representing the views of “twenty-nine taxpayers” from New Castle (figure 1). This document, phrased as a legal injunction while possessing no actual power, expresses guarded sympathy toward the yeshiva: it acknowledges the “past sufferings of the members of the community of Yeshiva Farms Settlement.” It expresses sympathy with the yeshiva’s “efforts toward rehabilitation,” and it even suggests that it might be necessary temporarily to “subordinate property rights to human rights.” But the signees maintain that a permanent yeshiva in Mount Kisco is undesirable, not being “the most appropriate use of the land”—meaning that property values would be threatened by the presence of the yeshiva. While recommending its continued “non-conforming use of the property” until an alternative could be found, these residents urged a rejection of Weissmandel’s application for permanent residency.²⁰ While the names on this document are not all legible, those that can be read do not appear to be those of Jews.

18. “Seminary Wins Right to Teach Refugees,” the *New York Times*, November 16, 1948.

19. “Mt. Kisco Refugee Seminary Wins Approval of Zoning Appeals Board,” the *Committee Reporter*. American Jewish Committee, volume 5, number 11. Page 8.

20. Walter Bennett, “Yeshiva Case Is Unsettled,” *New Castle Tribune*, Chappaqua, New York, October 29, 1948, 1.

A RESOLUTION UNANIMOUSLY ADOPTED
OCTOBER 12, 1948 BY A GROUP OF TWENTY-NINE
TAXPAYERS IN THE TOWNSHIP OF NEW CASTLE.

WHEREAS, Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc., has in the Spring of this year purchased property in the Town of New Castle consisting of two hundred ten (210) acres, with various improvements, formerly known as the Brewster Estate, and

WHEREAS, there is now pending before the Zoning Board of Appeals of the Town of New Castle an application by said Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc. for permission to use such property as a religious school and for vocational training, and

WHEREAS, a group of taxpayers have opposed and are opposing the granting of such application, and

WHEREAS, said taxpayers are of the opinion that the granting of such application will not be conducive to the encouragement of the most appropriate use of land within the Town of New Castle, and are also of the opinion that this property is inappropriate to the attainment of all the stated purposes of Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc., and

WHEREAS, this group of taxpayers and certain other taxpayers in the Town of New Castle, recognizing the past sufferings of the members of the community of Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc., being sympathetic with their present need for suitable emergency housing accommodations, being desirous of assisting them in their efforts toward rehabilitation, and recognizing that in order to accomplish the purposes herein set forth, it may be necessary temporarily to subordinate property rights to human rights, and

WHEREAS, representatives of this group have met with certain other taxpayers in the Town of New Castle who are not opposing the application, but who concur in the opinion of this group as hereinbefore set forth, and who are also desirous of helping Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc. to find a permanent location suitable to the accomplishment of their stated purposes,

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that recommendation be made to the Zoning Board of Appeals of the Town of New Castle that it deny the application of Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc., but that it be further recommended to the said Zoning Board of Appeals that, in the exercise of its sound discretion, it allow said Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc. to continue its present non-conforming use of the property for such period of time as the Board may deem reasonable and sufficient for the attainment of the objectives above stated; that a copy of this resolution be forwarded to Yeshiva Farms Settlement, Inc. for their consideration, prior to the next hearing of the Zoning Board of Appeals, and that a copy also be forwarded directly to said Board of Appeals.

The undersigned Taxpayers of New Castle concur in the opinions and resolutions above set forth.

Handwritten signatures:
C. Schenker
E. J. Madley
Mrs. E. J. Madley
to P. ...

Handwritten signatures:
Wesco Parks
" "
" "

Figure 1.

Thus, while Roth's story characterizes the resistance to the yeshiva as sponsored exclusively by acculturated Jews nervous about their gentile neighbors, the actual case appears, at least on the outside, to have been initiated by non-Jews (more about which later).

By this point, news of the controversy had spread throughout the community and beyond, leading multiple constituencies to rally behind the yeshiva's cause, including the American Jewish Committee and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, who worked behind the scenes to quiet the opposition. Local Christian clergymen issued statements of support and both local newspapers weighed in with editorials defending the yeshiva's rights to the land. These favorable arguments often took the moral high ground, evoking the language of "Judeo-Christian values" alongside notions of civic duty and moral responsibility. Typical in this regard is a letter printed in the *New Castle Tribune* in which local residents Esther and Kenneth Wright (again, presumably, not Jewish) write, "Love thy neighbor" is not a hollow phrase to be tossed off lightly. It is one of the teachings of a way of life that has made America what it is today. Let us keep it that way."²¹ In a long letter published in the *New York Times*, a particularly strident local supporter, Helen Bruce Baldwin, envisions the opponents of the yeshiva as downright un-American. She contends that the yeshiva has been subjected to "an indignity of intolerable proportions... an alarming threat to the most elementary concepts of human rights." She concludes by describing the yeshiva conflict as a warning for anyone who supports a democratic government rooted in Christian values: "Wherever civil rights and simple Christian ethics are flagrantly abrogated, freedom has indeed begun to burn."²² By blending patriotic and religious discourses, these appeals framed the yeshiva controversy as a test case for the defense of American principles.

In the midst of this debate, Weissmandel himself issued a public statement, guided (and presumably drafted) by a subcommittee of the New York chapter of the AJC. In his statement, Weissmandel strikes the same patriotic register:

In the hours of hopeless despair, a door has been opened for us in this country which we have always dreamed of as the country of liberty, tolerance, and justice for all who have suffered. We have brought with us the unshakeable belief in God and the anxiety to seek for the truth. We know that with these ideas we are not strangers in this country.... We sincerely hope that the friendly people of Westchester County will overlook the superficial forms of outer appearance and look deeper into our hearts and minds.²³

21. Letters to the Editor, *New Castle Tribune*, Chappaqua, New York, November 19, 1948, 4.

22. Letter to the Editor, the *New York Times*, November 27, 1948, 16.

23. Quoted in Mauer, 324.

Weissmandel emphasized not the uniqueness of the DPs' plight, but their typicality. He also tacitly linked his students with the Puritan settlers: here, once again, was a persecuted religious minority looking for a safe haven. To appeal in this way to patriotic discourses was hardly new for Jewish groups in the United States (Louis Marshall had brought charges of anti-Americanism against Henry Ford's antisemitic journalism two decades earlier), but in the early postwar era, with Cold War liberalism on the rise, it became increasingly widespread and effective.²⁴ Interestingly, at a time when religion was on the rise in America in general, the intensity of the yeshiva group's religious faith could be made into a point in its favor, as long as it could be couched in familiar enough terms. Weissmandel was evidently advised to emphasize his community's "unshakeable belief in God," without adding anything about the specificities of Jewish practice.

The strategy evidently worked. At a special hearing of the New Castle Zoning Board of Appeals on November 16, a compromise was reached. The yeshiva was permitted to remain on its property as long as certain conditions were met.²⁵ In the initial settlement, the extent of these conditions underscored the board's ongoing reservations: Only forty of the 254 acres could be used (the rest should be available for development and public roads), the number of livestock had to be kept to three hundred chickens and twelve cows, sanitary and fire regulations had to be strictly obeyed, the language of secular instruction had to be switched from Yiddish to English as quickly as possible, the school had to convert its teaching instruction to "standard American-Jewish pedagogy," and the official name had to be changed from "Yeshiva of Nitra" to "Orthodox Talmudic Seminary for Men." In response to continued pressure, the board soon eased these restrictions.²⁶ By June of 1949, the livestock provision was increased, the yeshiva was allowed to use more of its land, and the much-criticized pedagogy requirements had been eliminated. Ongoing philanthropic efforts by supporters, both Jewish and non-Jewish, enabled the yeshiva to pay off its debts. After nearly a year of legal and public relations work, the Nitra Yeshiva, renamed the "Yeshiva Farm Settlement," was firmly established in its new location, where it remains to this day.²⁷ Reporting on the resolution, a *New York*

24. Mark Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern American Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

25. Oscar Povall, "Approve Yeshiva Petition," *New Castle Tribune*, Chappaqua, New York, November 19, 1948, 1; "Seminary Wins Right to Teach Refugees," special to the *New York Times*, the *New York Times*, November 16, 1948.

26. "b." *Committee Reporter*, American Jewish Committee, volume 5, number 11, 8.

27. Today, the Yeshiva Farm Settlement is home to a mixture of Hasidic and non-Hasidic students. See Suzanne DeChillo, "Hasidim Flourish in Suburban Setting," the *New York Times*, June 20, 1982: WC1.

Times columnist observed with delight the incongruity of the setting with its purpose: “[A] Westchester estate with tennis courts and swimming pool will soon become the testing ground for a pattern of life drawn from the Old Testament.”²⁸ However misguided this reporter was about the yeshiva’s origins, the tone of encouragement echoes the positive responses that greeted the yeshiva throughout much of the community.

In retrospect, the yeshiva controversy underscores the ascendancy of the postwar liberalism and ecumenicism—a heightened sensitivity to the plight of Holocaust survivors that belies, to some extent, the cooler reaction that Beth Cohen documents in *Case Closed*.²⁹ The American Jewish Committee called the result “a signal victory for reason and justice, and a source of great satisfaction to the host of friends who came to the aid of the Yeshiva... a striking example of what can be accomplished through sound community relations.”³⁰ Local newspapers continued to publish supporting articles throughout the next few years, including a three-part “Brief History of the Jewish Religion,” written by the Reverend Kenneth Nye of the First Congregational Church, who hoped to give “greater understanding of the little refugee community to their non-Jewish neighbors.”³¹ These articles tell a story of heroic perseverance from the call to Abraham in the book of Genesis to the establishment of the Nitra Yeshiva in Mount Kisco. Nye hoped to lay to rest lingering suspicions among local non-Jews; he concludes by reassuring readers that members of the yeshiva are “mindful of their obligation to fuse their fine tradition with the best in American life.”³² While the yeshiva continued to face some resistance (a few instances of vandalism were reported over the next few years), the positive resolution of the controversy and the outpouring of support from key sectors of the community suggest that it marked a decisive victory for Weissmandel and his students.³³ It also provides evidence of effective cooperation between mainstream American Jewish and non-Jewish organizations with survivors of the Holocaust.

28. “70 Refugee Orphans to Farm and Study on Million-Dollar Estate in Westchester” the *New York Times*, 1947.

29. For a discussion of manifestations of philosemitism in postwar America, see Julian Levinson, “Connoisseurs of Angst: The Jewish Mystique and Postwar American Literary Culture” in *Philosemitism in History*, Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 235–252.

30. “A Victory for Fair Play,” *Committee Reporter*, American Jewish Committee, volume 6, number 9, 4.

31. “Brief History of the Jewish Religion by Local Minister,” *New Castle Tribune*, Chappaqua, New York, December 10, 1948. 1.

32. “Concluding Article on the Jewish People by Minister,” *New Castle Tribune*, Chappaqua, New York, January 6, 1949.

33. Shargell and Drimmer, 321.

III. Enter Roth

Though Roth never publicly discussed his sources for “Eli, the Fanatic,” it should not be surprising to find real events behind the story. Critics have noted Roth’s engagements throughout his career with history, as well as the ways in which he traverses between the real and the fictive, blurring the distinction between the “facts” and the multiple “counterlives” he imagines for his characters. Even the recent controversy surrounding Roth’s “An Open Letter to Wikipedia” in the *New Yorker* (September 6, 2012) only confirms his practice of drawing on real events. He fulminates against Wikipedia for citing the literary critic Anatole Broyard as the model for Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, explaining that the actual event at the novel’s core concerned his friend the sociologist Melvin Tumin.³⁴ Here Roth lays bare his Jamesian tendency to fix on some real-world *donnée* as the basis for his fictions, though an important distinction must be made between sources from direct personal experiences, as with *The Human Stain*, and those from the public record, as in novels such as *Our Gang*, *The Ghost Writer*, and *The Plot Against America*, which reconfigure the lives of well-known figures (Richard Nixon, Anne Frank, and Charles Lindberg, respectively).³⁵ Between these two poles “Eli, the Fanatic” resembles the latter cases in its being drawn from public history, though, given the obscurity of the yeshiva case by 1958, Roth must have assumed that few readers would link the story with these events. Indeed, since he never mentioned the case in interviews or other writings (nor did he respond to my personal inquiry about this matter), he evidently sought to frame his text less as fictionalized history than as an autonomous work of the imagination.

How much did Roth actually know about the case? The absence of any notes or materials for “Eli, the Fanatic” among his papers in the U.S. Library of Congress suggests that he did not perform extensive research. It is most likely, in fact, that his main source, quite possibly his only source, was a single article published in *Commentary* in 1949. According to writer Claudia Roth Pierpont, Roth became an avid *Commentary* reader during his senior year at Bucknell University in 1954, as he began shaping his self-image as a writer.³⁶ He later recalled his special fascination with the magazine, explaining that he had “no idea what it was, but here were articles and stories about Jews of a kind I had never come across before—objective, forthright, descriptive.”³⁷ While comb-

34. Philip Roth, “An Open Letter to Wikipedia,” *New Yorker*, September 6, 2012.

35. See Patrick Hayes. *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

36. Claudia Roth Pierpont. *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) 30.

37. *Ibid.*, 28.

ing through back issues of *Commentary* in the periodicals room in the Bucknell library, Roth could have read a stirring article about Holocaust survivors in Westchester and filed it away as the germ of a story.

The article in question was entitled “The Yeshiva Comes to Westchester: The Legalistic Hedges of Suburbia.”³⁸ The author was Herrymon Maurer, a Quaker who lived in New Castle, the township where the controversy had occurred, and whose publications to date included a biography of Gandhi entitled *Great Soul: The Growth of Gandhi*, and another *Commentary* piece on the plight of the Jewish DPs. Maurer’s Nitra Yeshiva article covers the events up to the first zoning board settlement, offering a running commentary that frames the controversy as a moral parable about privileged gentiles and abject, but spiritually elevated, Jews. He finds the Westchester elite guilty of selfishness, callousness toward the stranger, and fear of “the ghosts of Europe.” He observes that while acculturated Jews are tolerated by Westchester society, there are undeniable traces of genteel antisemitism, particularly when it comes to poorer Jews (322). The zoning board comes under fire for its small-minded legalism, which Maurer contrasts negatively with the alleged “legalism” of traditional Judaism. “A legalism dedicated to Deity and brotherhood,” Maurer writes, “does not separate. A legalism dedicated to middle-class man must separate—its core and aims are exclusiveness, separation” (326). As for Weissmandel, Maurer’s portrait verges on hagiography, a genre he had refined in his book on Gandhi: “[Weissmandel] has seen and felt the evil, the hatreds, and the horrors that erased religion, family, friends, work—everything but hope—a man who yet smiles with a serenity, a brilliance, and a strength that are set in the very form of his eyes” (319). Maurer notes in passing that some local Jews seem to have found themselves “somewhat embarrassed” by the presence of men whose “Orthodox hat and side curls were combined with poverty and broken English (322). But the main targets of his article are the upwardly mobile Christian suburbanites who turn a cold shoulder to the victims of Nazism. Weissmandel emerges as a saintly figure, restoring his students’ faith even though their safe harbor is less than ideal.

There are enough intertextual linkages between Maurer’s article and “Eli, the Fanatic” to suggest that Roth not only learned about the case from this article, but also composed his story as a tacit response to it. There is, first of all, the striking image of a yeshiva in a decaying Westchester estate that finds its way into the story’s opening lines. Eli is welcomed into the “sagging old mansion” (249) that has become home

38. Maurer, “The Yeshiva Comes to Westchester.”

to the DPs. Later, the estate is called “the old Puddington place” (a more pompously Anglo name than “Brewster,” the actual name). Roth was evidently captivated by the drama of demographic upheaval revealed by this case, the appearance of conspicuously Jewish Jews in the heart of WASP territory. Versions of this clash were common in postwar American cultural texts. The movie *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) culminates with the decision by the WASPy heroine, Cathy, to overcome her biases and allow the Goldman family to move into her home in upper-class Darien, Connecticut. Also consider Bernard Malamud’s *A New Life* (1961), in which a New York Jew joins the English department in “Arcadia” (modeled on Corvallis, Oregon) and Saul Bellow’s story “The Old System,” which hinges on the purchase of an old country club by an immigrant Jewish family in the midst of the postwar economic boom.³⁹ Consider also the famous scene in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, where Alvy Singer suddenly appears dressed as a quintessential Hasid at the dinner table of Annie’s WASPy family home. All of these works register actual demographic shifts through imagined scenes of Jewish-Christian encounter that are as fraught with tension as they are made to seem inevitable.

A specific motif Roth seems to have borrowed from Maurer’s article concerns the framing of the controversy as a clash of two legalisms. For Maurer, the yeshiva controversy shows the hypocrisy beneath antisemitic stereotypes. The inflexible legalists turn out not to be the Jews but the American suburbanites; middle-class American law reveals its inherent inflexibility, while the Judaism of the yeshiva proves to be a noble legalism “dedicated to Deity.” Roth similarly weaves his narrative around conflicting notions of “law.” Tzuref confounds Eli by contrasting secular law (“the law that is the law”) with a deeper kind of law (“What you call law, I call shame. The heart, Mr. Peck, the heart is law!”). Eli comes to learn that the civic laws to which he has devoted his life are void of deeper meaning: “Law didn’t seem to have anything to do with what was aggravating everybody. And that, of course, made him feel foolish and unnecessary” (254). Thus, Roth uses Maurer’s point about a clash of legalisms to raise a further question: Once the bankruptcy of middle-class life has been exposed, what recourse is there for a sensitive soul like Eli? Can he reclaim the “law of the heart,” or is it too late?

A number of other specific details from Maurer’s text reappear in Roth’s. Maurer quotes Weissmandel’s speech to the New Castle Zoning Board of Appeals in which he describes his students as, above all,

39. Bernard Malamud, *A New Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961); and Saul Bellow, “The Old System,” In *Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* (New York: Viking Press, 1968).

a “tired people” looking for refuge. In Eli’s first interview with Tzuref, the latter says, “We are tired. The headmaster is tired. The students are tired.” (252) When Eli’s wife accuses him of failing to wake the sleeping DP, Eli responds, “He was tired!” (257), and, finally, completing the process of internalization that is a central motif of the story, Eli begs to be released from his irritating neighbors by saying, “I’m tired. I’m going to sleep” (259). Maurer also notes that the yeshiva went into debt to local tradespeople, which becomes a motif early in “Eli, the Fanatic,” as does the motif of the skittishness of the students. Maurer notes that fifty students took off to hide in the woods when a police car entered the grounds on a friendly errand; Roth’s yeshiva students are likewise repeatedly pictured as fleeing the innocent Eli. Finally, Maurer’s observation that certain local Jews felt “somewhat embarrassed” by the yeshiva Jews, particularly those with “Orthodox hats,” reappears in Roth’s story, where the local Jews similarly fixate on the newcomers’ headgear (“‘Get the one with the hat. What a nerve, what a nerve” (253). A clash of legalisms, the incursion of the Jew in the decaying WASP manor, Jewish hats and Jewish fatigue—all figure in Maurer’s article and reappear in “Eli, the Fanatic.”

Roth’s practice here might be called a revisionary narrative poetics. Hence, to contextualize “Eli, the Fanatic” historically, we must read intertextually, parsing the text with an eye toward the ways in which it paraphrases, cites, revises, reverses, and critiques the *specific* source that Roth evidently used. Indeed, Maurer’s article becomes most illuminating at those moments when Roth works against its thesis, specifically its philosemitic thrust. First, Roth erases Maurer’s version of Weissmandel as the saint-like yeshiva leader with a heroic past. Instead, Roth splits the historical Weissmandel into two separate figures: the stubborn rabbinical leader known as Tzuref, who is reduced to the husk of a man (“a bald shaggy-browed man who looked as if he’d once been fat” [250]), and a mute Holocaust survivor known as “the greenie,” who figures largely as Eli’s shadowy double. Neither character has anything like a fleshed-out history: after two short dialogues with Eli, Tzuref disappears from the story; the greenie plays a decisive role but as a mysterious apparition:

[Eli] was stopped by the sight of the black coat that fell down below the man’s knees, and the hands which held each other in his lap. By the round-topped, wide-brimmed Talmudic hat, pushed onto the back of his head. And by the beard, which hid his neck and was so soft and thin it fluttered away and back again with each heavy breath he took. (253)

These fragments—dark coat, hands, hat, and beard—never coalesce into character. (Compare this to Maurer’s characterization of Weissmandel as

“a man who yet smiles with a serenity, a brilliance, and a strength that are set in the very form of his eyes”). Roth’s greenie remains nameless and voiceless, defined by the fact that he has “lost everything.”

Roth’s rabbinical character remains ill-defined, we might say, because the real focus of the story is Eli’s perception of him. The engine of the narrative comes not from a genuine interchange between characters so much as from Eli’s changing reactions to the greenie, an increasingly obsessive need to help him (“Tell me, what can I do for you, I’ll do it... Whatever I can do... Look, look what I’ve done *already*” [291]). Even at the end, the greenie himself never comes into focus; we get nothing like Weissmandel’s public statement of his community’s beliefs. Rather than achieving any actual communication, Eli merges his own identity with the ultra-Orthodox Jew, while the DP himself ends up eluding Eli, “mak[ing] a run for it” (291). During their final encounter, when the greenie mysteriously jabs his finger into the air and runs away, Eli has become a disciple of his own making: “And then, all alone, Eli had the revelation. He did not question his understanding, the substance or the source” (291). He is on a pilgrimage unsponsored by any teacher or tradition. If Roth sets up a potential narrative of discipleship, he undercuts it. Whereas Martin Buber’s renditions of Hasidic stories, popular among American Jewish intellectuals from the late 1940s, turn on the *tzaddik*-disciple relationship, Roth gives us a would-be disciple without a real *tzaddik* (righteous one), a potentially meaningful encounter without a genuine exchange.⁴⁰ Simply put, Roth, unlike Maurer, does not look to the yeshiva as a repository for values, a site of saving knowledge.

Considered more broadly, we can say that Roth’s meta-historical purpose is to critique the tendency toward hagiography that often attends portraits of Holocaust victims. Maurer’s article in *Commentary* creates a saint out of Weissmandel, and it was precisely this tone of sentimental reverence that Roth rejected in “Eli, the Fanatic,” and indeed in subsequent texts, including *The Ghost Writer*, which insists on the desanctification of Anne Frank. If “Eli, the Fanatic,” obscures the historical Weissmandel, the historical Anne Frank is brazenly rewritten in *The Ghost Writer*. Moreover, if Roth refuses to focus on the heroism of the yeshiva leaders in “Eli, the Fanatic,” it is because he focuses on the desire for identification that lies behind hagiography in the first place. Eli is a fanatic because he abandons himself to a grandiose fantasy of self. In this sense, Eli can be said to perform precisely the opposite act of Roth himself: If Eli subordinates his identity to his fantasy of authentic

40. See Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*. Translated by Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947).

Jewish suffering, Roth views his survivor figure from a distance. Whereas Eli recreates himself as a medium for the voices of history, Roth does not imagine the subjectivity of the survivor.

Another key difference between Roth and Maurer concerns their representation of the vectors of opposition to the yeshiva. Whereas Maurer attributes local opposition to genteel antisemitism among Christian Westchesterites, Roth pins it on local Jews. When the yeshiva receives a list of complaints, it comes not (as in Maurer's account) from a zoning board of appeals dominated by non-Jews, but from Eli, the Jewish lawyer sent by the local Jewish community to censor an outward demeanor that strikes them as too Jewish: "We're not just dealing with people," one local Jew tells Eli. "These are religious fanatics is what they are. Dressing like that. What I'd really like to find out is what goes on up there" (276). Antisemitism has moved from an outward antagonist to a virtual threat; Roth's acculturated Jews have internalized the gentile gaze. Other stories in the *Goodbye, Columbus* collection similarly move away from gentile-Jewish fault lines to internecine conflicts. In the title story, the Patimkins' assumed gentile neighbors never appear, even though Brenda's nose job is implicitly a response to the gentile gaze. In "Defender of the Faith," the Jewish GIs take advantage of the special privileges afforded Jews and are punished not by their gentile commanding officer but by their Jewish sergeant. In "Eli, the Fanatic," Roth studiously avoids any insinuation that antisemitism constitutes an actual, vital threat. One of the Woodenton Jews observes this: "Old man Puddington'll roll over in his grave" (255), and yet when non-Jews do appear in the story, they seem entirely innocent of antisemitic sentiments. A garage attendant greets Eli, clad in his Orthodox garb, with a friendly, "How are you, Pop?" (288); even the feared neighbor Harriet Knudson greets him with a kind, "Good morning, Mr. Peck" (294). Hence, the logic of the story suggests that Christian intolerance may be a figment of Jewish paranoia more than any actual threat.

One might explain this erasure of overt antisemitism from "Eli, the Fanatic" as a bid for literary novelty.⁴¹ As Josh Lambert has observed, many of the most highly acclaimed novels from the 1940s were structured around discrimination against Jews: Gwethalyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven* (1944), Arthur Miller's *Focus* (1945), Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland* (1946), Abraham Bernstein's *Home Is the Hunted* (1947), Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), and Bellow's *The*

41. Josh Lambert. "'What's Your Idea of Who Runs Things?': Bellow's *The Victim* and Thinking about Jewish Power in the 1940s." Presentation given at a seminar entitled "Jews in Postwar America: New Approaches." Association for Jewish Studies Conference, Baltimore, December 2014.

Victim (1947). As a literary theme, antisemitism was spent, hardly the kind of incendiary material Roth was aiming for at the outset of his career. Moreover, Roth's downplaying of Christian antisemitism mirrors actual postwar trends. As we have seen, the way the events played themselves out in Mount Kisco reflects the greater acceptance of Jews in postwar society under the rubric of the "Judeo-Christian" civilization.⁴² Though the ultimate fate of the yeshiva is not addressed in "Eli, the Fanatic," in actuality numerous sympathetic gentiles rushed to the yeshiva's defense, enabling it to remain. From this perspective, Roth's focus on Jewish anxiety rather than Christian antisemitism reflects a trenchant reflection on a period of transition in American society, when the fight against antisemitism was an increasingly prevalent feature of public discourse (how else can we explain the broad popularity of the anti-antisemitic books of the late 1940s?).

But Roth's decision to marginalize gentile intolerance may have been accurate in a much more specific sense. As it turns out, he may have been stunningly on the mark regarding the Jewish role in the anti-yeshiva campaign. While it is difficult to follow the paper trail for this angle on the story, evidence suggests that the driving force behind efforts to oust the yeshiva came from wealthy, suburban Jews—precisely as in Roth's story.⁴³ This revelation comes from a letter that was sent by a woman named Pearl Koeningsberg to the historian Earl Conrad, who was collecting information for a biography of Billy Rose, a showman and producer who lived for a time in Mount Kisco. Rose happens to have been one of the local Jews who provided financial support to the yeshiva, and the letter writer apparently knew him and the situation surrounding the yeshiva controversy quite well. Here is the relevant part of Koeningsberg's letter to Earl Conrad:

I can tell you that Billy Rose and the wife of the writer of military affairs in the 'Times' helped rescue over 100 Jewish Theological Students, six Rabbinical teachers with their wives and children from being 'forced' out of their quarters in Mount Kisco, N.Y., all escapees from Hitler by two anti semitic Jews one of whom ran for mayor of N.Y. City and the other a banker in Wall st. [her emphasis]. The Jewish Farm Settlement as it is known [sic] is ten minutes ride deep in the woods of Mt. Kisco where work + study is the policy... It is thriving.⁴⁴ (Figure 2)

42. Various factors have been used to explain this shift, such as a reckoning with Hitler's crimes, the ideology of Cold War liberalism, and a broadening of the middle class to include previously marginalized European ethnics. See Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since World War II*, in *The Jewish People in America*, volume 5 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 28–50.

43. I am very much indebted to the writer Mark Cohen for this reference.

44. Letter from Pearl Koeningsberg, Earl Conrad Papers, 1950–1969. University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives. Letter is dated September 12, 1968.

Sept. 12, '66 77

Dear Sir,

In response to your request in your book review of the "Times", pleased be advised that the Jewish Information Bureau informed me that you can find the autobiography of Billy Rose in the main library 42nd St + Fifth ave. (6)

I can tell you that Billy Rose and the wife of the writer of military affairs in the "Times" helped rescue over 100 Jewish Theological Students, six Rabbinical teachers with their wives and children from being "forced" out of their quarters in Mount Kisco, N.Y. all escaped from Hitler by two anti-semitic Jews, one of whom ran for mayor of N.Y. City and the other, a banker in Wall, St. The Jewish Farm settlement as it is known is 10 minutes ride deep in the woods of Mt. Kisco where work + study is the policy. Best wishes for success. It is thriving

Sincerely,
Beall H. --

Mr. Benjamin Koenigsberg

Figure 2.

The letter writer was evidently an observant Jew; the top of the letter carries the Hebrew acronym for “with God’s help.” While she does not specify who these “anti semitic” Jews were, further research suggests that the Jew who ran for mayor must have been Jonah Goldstein, who ran in 1945. Goldstein’s public record, interestingly, includes major Jewish philanthropic work, complicating the image of a self-hating Jew working to oust the yeshiva. Nevertheless, if Pearl Koeningsberg is correct, it would appear that, just as Roth imagined and contrary to Maurer’s reconstruction, the impetus behind the anti-yeshiva movement came from successful local Jews. While it is possible that Roth may have learned of behind-the-scenes machinations by local Jews, it is more likely that Roth read Maurer’s article and crafted his fiction as an “imagined” revision, a counterhistory. Let us say that Roth smelled a rat in Maurer’s account or that he simply found the pious philosemitism too much to bear. Then, when he reversed Maurer’s account, he came closer to the facts than he may have realized. If Pearl Koeningsberg is telling the truth—and why not?—Roth’s fictional Woodenton Jews were no worse than two actual Jews who sought to remove Weissmandel and his students.

This obscure letter would appear to vindicate Roth against charges at the beginning of his career that his less-than-sympathetic portraits of Jews were distortions of a neurotic mind. Here, in any case, Roth’s unflattering portrayal of suburban Jews touched on fact. At the same time, it seems odd to praise Roth for maintaining fidelity to the historical record when he generally seems so intent on declaring his independence from the facts of history. Indeed, the power of “Eli, the Fanatic” on readers has derived precisely from the fact that it has been read as an allegory with myriad possible meanings, not as a document of real events. To be sure, Roth’s text must be sharply distinguished from, say, John Hersey’s *The Wall* (1950), with its efforts to document daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto through a thinly veiled portrait of the historical Emanuel Ringelblum. Hersey has told interviewers of his dawning sense in the 1940s that “journalism could be enlivened by using the devices of fiction.”⁴⁵ Roth, by contrast, eschews documentation for its own sake in “Eli, the Fanatic,” transmuting a specific case into a broadly applicable allegory. Had the actual events been widely known, the range of meanings readers have found may very well have been truncated. The great irony in this case is that Roth appears to have reproduced an account that hews closer to the actual events than the “non-fictional” version produced by Maurer; and yet the story’s force depends on its being read not as an actual case, but as an allegory. The multiplicity of readings the story has generated may very well have been foreclosed had its historical *donnée* been widely known.

45. Interview with Jonathan Dee, “The Art of Fiction,” *The Paris Review*, number 92.

Conclusions

We have thus created an archive for the Nitra Yeshiva controversy of 1947–1948, in which “Eli, the Fanatic” is but one of various documents. By rereading the story in this context, we learn that Roth works against the grain of much of the public discourse surrounding the actual controversy. Whereas sympathetic non-Jews like Herrymon Maurer or the Reverend Kenneth Nye (of the *New Castle Tribune* articles on Judaism) celebrated the spiritual tenacity of the yeshiva, and whereas Maurer singles out genteel antisemites as the culprits, Roth imagines an anxious set of upwardly mobile Westchester Jews, disturbed by their un-aculturated coreligionists. In so doing, however, Roth inadvertently seems to have discovered the deeper truth that wealthy Jews were, in fact, behind the opposition. Roth’s fictitious Jews of Woodenton would seem to be a rather accurate portrayal of the “anti semitic Jews” who, according to Pearl Koeningsberg, tried to force the yeshiva students “from their quarters.”

In light of this fact, one feels inclined to turn back to Herrymon Maurer’s *Commentary* article and ask about its distortions. Why would a messy communal conflict, involving diverse interests and powerful intra-Jewish divisiveness, be reduced to a morality fable pitting noble Jews against evil suburbanites? And how would Maurer and his *Commentary* readers have responded to the idea that a pair of powerful Jews may have been behind the whole thing—if this turned out to be undeniable? Possibly, they would have shown the same resistance that many showed, well, to Roth’s early stories themselves. But this would only have reinforced one of Roth’s themes in this work, that perception is governed not by fact alone, but by desire, fantasy, and psychic need.

At the same time, this historical reconstruction introduces moral questions about Roth’s creative decisions. However we might explain the narrative function of Roth’s silent survivor figure, it is evident that Roth has effectively erased the historical Weissmandel, a figure who saved Jewish lives by negotiating with the Archbishop of Canterbury and leading Nazi officials, who successfully re-established a major Hungarian yeshiva in America, who became one of the most outspoken and controversial critics of the Zionist leadership during the war, and whose original *kinot* verses, songs of lament, were published and extensively commented on by his students.⁴⁶ While one would hardly want to censure Roth’s imagination or demand that he accurately represent this or that

46. Rabbi Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandel, “Kinat Min Ha Meitzar,” annotation and commentary by Jacob Fuchs. 2007

historical figure (especially given Roth's infamous wrangling with critics over his portrayals of Jews), the hollowing out of the historical Weissmandel calls for reflection. Is Roth not guilty of denying a voice—and, by extension, the very humanity—of a Holocaust survivor who was also by any account an extraordinary personage? Such a charge becomes even more complex, since in this case, Roth's fiction has circulated widely while the historical record has been largely forgotten. Whereas Hersey's *The Wall* has helped to vivify the travails of the historical Ringelblum, "Eli, the Fanatic," with its mute survivor figure, has, in a sense, eclipsed the historical Weissmandel. But this, of course, is hardly the fault of a 26-year-old writer whose bold imaginings of Jews were in the late 1950s opening new directions for American Jewish fiction.

How, then, does this particular case illuminate the broader ways in which archival work can deepen our reading of American Jewish literature? Most importantly, it reminds us that the lines between "fiction" and "history" are never clear-cut: both are complex interweavings of interpretation, invention, elaboration, speculation, and critique. Sometimes, as in this case, a fictional reinvention of history contains a deeper kernel of truth than the most comprehensive "non-fictional" account. Hence, we are encouraged to broaden our sense of the archive for a given historical period or event to include fictional retellings, even when these might appear to veer into allegory. This enlarged sense of the archive deprives us of any clear-cut distinction between fact and fiction, primary and secondary source, but this blurring can have the productive outcome of vivifying the complexity of textual inscription more generally. The "truth" of an event may well escape the nets of historical report—and then unexpectedly emerge from the most fanciful invention. So let the archive expand to include fiction alongside journalism, private letters, public statements, and so on, and let us explore the interrelations between such accounts, and the ways in which they comment on and inform one another. And, finally, let our quest for unalloyed historical truth be placed on hold, though our adventures in our newly capacious archive may make fanatics of us all.