

From Delancey Street to Fifth Avenue

OUR CROWD: The Great Jewish Families of New York. By Stephen Birmingham. Harper & Row. \$8.95.

PORTAL TO AMERICA: The Lower East Side. Edited by Allan Schoener. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$12.95.

Reviewed by

RICHARD M. ELMAN

THESE books complement each other, as both are social histories of Jewish life in New York around the turn of the century. There, however, the similarity ends. *Our Crowd* focuses on the life and times of such wealthy Jews as the Seligmans, the Loebes, Lehmans, and the Schiffs, while *Portal to America* gives us a photographic and journalistic account of the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side. The lives led by the German Jews of *Our Crowd* were, in the main, far more craven than those eked out by the new immigrants from Eastern Europe. Just imagine having to cozy up to "robber barons" such as Gould, Hill, or the elder Hariman. They were financed, re-financed, had and unhad by *Our Crowd* but never once does Birmingham indicate that these Wall Street brigands were anything more than suitable foils for a bunch of nice Jewish boys from Germany.

Mr. Birmingham's chief skill is as an anecdotist; his book derives its life from an accounting of gossip, crotchets and eccentricities. Reading *Our Crowd* I learned that one German Jewish scion was sent into America by his mother with a thousand dollar bill sewn into the seat of his pants, and how a famous matron cuckolded her husband with a French actor. All very funny pieces of absolute trivia.

LOST to Birmingham are the great masses of immigrants who shared similar dreams of coming to wealth and prominence as those of *Our Crowd* and got just about nowhere. Lost, too, are the great social and political movements of the era when the nation seemed in a constant turmoil of labor disagreements, rapacious industrialism and frontier violence. He does not neglect, however, to mention *Our Crowd's* anti-Semitism, and its strongly assimilationist tendencies, but he makes this seem like just another of their eccentricities, like their dedication to family and gossip, their addiction to culture or

as a documentary history of sorts. It is more of a bright recollection of how life used to be on the Lower East Side rather than a social reportage (now history) on a par with Hutchins Hapgood's *The Spirit of the Ghetto*. There is no original research. But the same vivid selection of poignant pictures which brought thousands of visitors to the Jewish Museum during its successful five-month exhibition grace this book with beauty and intimacy.

Some of the feeling of the religious, social, cultural and economic life of the Jewish immigrant community transplanted in another world is communicated through a fine selection of newspaper articles and excerpts from the writings of Hapgood, Abe Cahan and the *Bintel Brief* section of the *Jewish Daily Forward*.

Although we share the steerage deck, the arrival at Ellis Island, the dirt, the filth, the crowded market place with

hucksters and peddlers on top of each other, the theater, the Talmud Torah, the sweatshops and the birth of the garment union with the turning of each photograph, glossed over in this most historic and critical chapter of the American Jewish community are any references to gangsters or illicit behavior. It is all *glatt kosher*.

TO anybody who never investigated the records of the Lower East Side or who wishes nostalgically that it be reinvented, *Portal to America* is a useful and informative book. What is missing, however, is the other side of Jewish life—the non-kosher living. The Lower East Side is a monument to the Jewish formula: struggle + hard work = success. But for the many successes there were also failures; those who did succeed and those who didn't both exemplify the Jewish experience.

Just as the first German Jew-

ish immigrants must be held responsible for creating a great deal more than those monstrous gingerbread summer houses in Elberon, New Jersey, resulting in a Jewish elite of power, prestige, and persuasion unmatched in the Diaspora; so the former Russian and Polish and Galician Jewish masses, up from the Lower East Side, have become the representatives of a somewhat larger elite in which, as before, much of the specifically Jewish content of their lives has been cast to one side by the demands of success and the imperatives of professionalism. The next time somebody sets out to write a popular social history about Jews in New York, I would demand one thing of him: After we are told all the success stories, would he please let us know how we can differentiate between the Gentiles and the Jews.

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Nevertheless, the accomplishments of *Our Crowd* were, after all, not altogether disreputable. Some of them managed to take a genuine and serious philanthropic interest in the plight of their downtown co-religionists, establishing charities and institutions of lasting vitality and merit. Additionally, much of New York City's cultural life today is also the result of their philanthropies.

PORTAL TO AMERICA, on the other hand, must be classified

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