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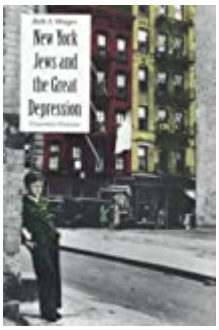

Beth S. Wenger. *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. vii + 269 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06265-6.

Reviewed by Ronald H. Bayor (Georgia Tech)

Published on H-Urban (January, 1998)

Beth Wenger, a professor of Jewish history at the University of Pennsylvania, offers in this book a detailed, interior look at New York's Jewish community during the Depression years. Its primary thesis is that the Jewish responses to the Depression changed Jewish patterns in regard to politics, organizational life, neighborhoods, schooling and family, and that these new patterns provided the foundation for postwar Jewish life.

She focuses on the East European Jews and their children to analyze also Jewish assimilation as this community moved from immigrant to second generation and found ways to maintain its ethnic identity while also adapting to a changing American society. The questions she asks are good ones and basic for any understanding of adaptation, identity and assimilation no mater what ethnic group is being studied. How to be more American and yet still be Jewish (or Italian or German) is one of the first issues immigrant groups faced in the New World.

To uncover the ways in which Jews adjusted their patterns, set the stage for postwar life, and maintained their ethnic identity, the author carefully details various aspects of Jewish life and thoroughly examines the impact of the Depression. Some chapters are stronger than others in offering new information and interpretations. The chapter on the economy provides a closer look at various classes within the Jewish community than has been available before. However, it ultimately reaches similar conclusions as previous books that Jews, due to their occupational profile, were able to get through the Depression more easily than other groups, although there was much individual suffering among working-class Jews and those facing employment discrimination. Similarly, the conclusion in another chapter that Jewish youth stayed in school for more years than before and put off marriage is not surprising. Chapters on neighborhoods, politics, and institutional life provide fresher detail and more interesting observations as does the information on women.

Wenger is effective in describing Jewish women's responses to the economic crisis, their contribution to the family economy, and the general desire to conform to the American middle-class style of only the husband working for wages outside the home. Also interesting is her discussion of neighborhoods and class divisions, the sense of closeness and help provided within these local communities, and the political activism, as illustrated by rent strikes and opposition to evictions, within these areas of the city. Neighborhood politics on the streets, rather than in the club houses, reflected a tradition of commitment to social justice that dove-tailed with the growing social welfare concerns of the Democratic party. Jewish ethnic culture found its soul mate in the liberalism of the Roosevelt New Deal. Jewish religious-ethnic

values became the national values and indicated the assimilation of Jews into the national political culture.

These points are important and are discussed well, but I did want to raise one relatively minor overstatement in regard to neighborhoods and one other concern. The West Bronx consisted of more than the Grand Concourse, which was clearly the wealthiest Jewish area in the Bronx. Streets off the Concourse and into the West Bronx indicated some variety of Jewish sections and classes similar to that found in the East Bronx. Not all West Bronx buildings housed the middle class. Many were walk-ups for the working class and were interspersed throughout the West Bronx section. There was a difference between these two areas but it was not as great as the author relates. It is certainly an overstatement to say that "to live in the West Bronx meant to enjoy the best the city had to offer and to be spared the Depression's harshest blows" (p. 91). Furthermore, Wenger also notes that "Jewish neighborhoods of the thirties provided a sheltering and protective environment" (p. 102). However this statement ignores the serious anti-Semitic outbursts in a number of these communities in the latter part of the decade. The problem was that Jews did not live in these neighborhoods by themselves and the ethnic-related tensions of the outside world often crept into their communities.

The author's analysis is strongest in regard to Jewish federations and synagogues. Here she shows how these institutions faced the Depression and altered their practices. The New Deal's relief policies forced Jewish charitable organizations to find another reason to exist and new ways of appealing to New York's Jews. The Depression changed these Jewish agencies as they became more involved in such activities as sustaining the ethnic culture and supporting family life. Moving from charity to more comprehensive functions allowed these agencies to be well placed to serve the postwar generations. Synagogues too broadened their activities with more concern over social issues and greater outreach to the community.

Although scholars will not be surprised by some of the book's findings, it is nonetheless a very valuable and useful study. Pulling together the various ways Jews responded to the Depression and New Deal reveals the process of transition as immigrant communities became more American and struggled with that change. The book is also a good complement to other studies of this inter-war period, particularly Deborah Dash Moore's *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (1981) and my own *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941* (1978). Wenger's work should also be instructive to scholars of other ethnic groups during this period.

Studies of the inner worlds of specific ethnic groups are informative and worthwhile, but let me add that at some point historians must move beyond such analyses to a more comparative approach. No ethnic group, even within fairly homogeneous neighborhoods, lived in an ethnic vacuum. They interacted with other groups, and often assessed their mobility and defined their assimilation in relation to these "others," especially if the other group had arrived earlier. The reality of life in schools, jobs and many neighborhoods was multi-ethnic.

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Citation: Ronald H. Bayor. Review of Wenger, Beth S., *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

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