

The Jewishness of *Jews Without Money*

PAUL BUHLE

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the 1996 edition of *Jews Without Money* (originally published in 1930) was how the political wrangling of the past had slipped into history, leaving behind one of the most magnificent of Jewish-American sagas. Alfred Kazin's introduction to the new edition almost skipped over Michael Gold's better-known reputation as polemicist for the *Daily Worker* and its literary counterparts through some thick and much thin, all the way to Gold's death in 1967. *Jews Without Money* had been written as Gold's own

and *Misdemeanors* roasted the hypocritical figures among the Jewish-American arrivistes, Gold lacerated the diamond-wearing matrons, the slum lords, the sweatshop kings, and others who had scant mercy for their own people (and wanted to be accepted by the Gentiles, preferably rich Gentiles, more than anything).

Not all the villains were Jews, by any means. Gold was keen on the Irish cops of New York who took pride in drawing blood with their clubs at any Jewish labor activity, especially if they could bash a young radical woman. He took in the others, boxers to politicians, who were part of Jewish life but not of it. But Gold was more interested in human consequences. In one of his famous phrases, "America is so rich and fat, because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants."

Gold wrote, in his own introduction to the book, that he could not accept America's gods because he had his own idol: his mother. If this sounds amazingly saccharine for an avowed atheist and revolutionary, it is nevertheless the deepest sentiment in the novel and the one that rings the truest after all these years. A wife: a "buttinski" and reformer, self-sacrificing for anyone in trouble, literal midwife for home births, defender of neighbors threatened by drunken husbands, also proud to be Jewish in no small part because antisemitism showed how low and animalistic the haters were — all this thanks to a marriage broker. Jewish also because the

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personal story of Jewish slum life with a heroic-political ending as brief and irrelevant as the ending of a Hollywood melodrama. The real thing was the rest of the saga.

And what a saga! The Yiddish short-story writer and dramatist Leon Kobrin became known, mainly by virtue of his stories in the *Forverts*, as the "Jewish Zola," chronicler of misery and impoverishment. If the sobriquet had not already been earned, Gold would have had the best claim. Original Sin is not the problem of the Lower East Side inhabitants; poverty sinks into every corpuscle of their collective blood. The Sin is real, but it belongs to the bullies and the braggarts. Generations before Woody Allen's *Crimes*

Paul Buhle's latest project is *Yiddishland*, a comic art volume collaboration with Harvey Pekar and others.



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memory of Europe, the relatives left behind in Europe, one might suggest the 800 years of *Yiddishkayt*, was inextricably part of her sense of family and self. What would a Jew be without that memory, or the generosity of spirit toward the poor that his mother represented?

Jews Without Money, the testimony of Michael Granich aka Mike Gold, is alive as long

as Jewish-American immigrant history plays a vivid role in collective memory — and that shows no sign of dissipating. For all Gold's particularities, it's certain that the election of Barack Obama with the overwhelmingly enthusiastic support of Jewish voters is one more reminder that if poverty is the real sin, reform offers redemption. Mike Gold knew it a long time ago. 

Jewish Women as Industrious Earners

ALLISON SCHACHTER

Between 17th-century Europe and contemporary American Jewish culture, the representations of Jewish women and money have reversed. In traditional European Jewish culture, a woman was valorized if she could earn enough money to support her family, allowing her husband to devote himself entirely to studying Jewish texts. By the late 19th-century, however, Jewish intellectuals embraced European bourgeois gender norms, and perceived Jewish women's roles as economic providers as backwards. Once valued as industrious earners, Jewish women were now to be relegated to the domestic sphere, while Jewish men transformed themselves into ideal breadwinners. By the mid-20th century in America, Jewish women were stripped of their once-admired economic utility and portrayed as predatory spenders or parasitic consumers — as overbearing mothers or Jewish American princesses.

This negative turn in the cultural representation of Jewish women as greedy consumers is a recent phenomenon. In the 17th-century, Glückel of Hameln authored one of the earliest known Jewish memoirs, detailing the rise and fall of her own fortunes. A 54-year-old woman with business acumen, her obsession with money was practical: widowed with eight of her twelve children unmarried, she took over her husband's business to ensure her children's future. In the memoir, Glückel lovingly describes her marriage as a business partnership, boasting that her husband would turn only to her for business advice.


While Glückel unselfconsciously proclaimed her business smarts in 17th-century Prussia, by the 19th-century women's economic power became a source of Jewish cultural anxiety. In his satirical epistolary novel, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl*, Sholem Aleichem portrays a very different gendered

economy. Menakhem-Mendl, the prototypical Jewish *luftmentsh*, absconds with his wife's dowry to Odessa where he plays the commodities exchange. In letters home to his wife, Sheyne-Sheyndl, he spins tales of markets he barely comprehends and describes the marble tables of Café Fanconi and elegant displays of gold jewelry and women's clothing. His wife's letters, however, provide a different tone. Sheyne-Sheyndl does not care about fancy cafes or shop windows; she understands the value of a ruble and how far it will go to pay for medical care. In increasingly angry letters, she pleads with her

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husband to sell his holdings and return home. Whereas Glückel's husband respected his wife's financial advice, the fictional Menakhem-Mendl ignores his wife's urgent pleas.

Sheyne-Sheyndl's fears of abandonment and her economic vulnerability mark a turning point in the representation of Jewish women. A Jewish woman's practical concern for her children's welfare and her fears of abandonment, by the end of the 19th century, are dismissed, disparaged, and satirized. While Sheyne-Sheyndl frets, it is her husband who fantasizes about fortunes, seduced by the unattained decadence and luxury of the urban arcades.

In 20th-century American Jewish culture we see the culmination of a dramatic reversal in the representation of Jewish women. Jewish men become economic heroes — the shrewd accountants and business executives — while Jewish women are the wasteful consumers, who pine after great fortunes and the fashionable items on display in America's shopping malls. 

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