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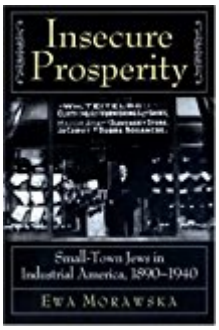
Ewa T. Morawska. *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. xxv + 369 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-03735-6.



Reviewed by Jay A. Gertzman

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Jews in large cities during the interwar period achieved remarkable educational and occupational advancement and white-collar, middle-class status; they also became more secular and committed to American criteria for leisure-time enjoyments and respect from fellow citizens. This book examines the extent to which the experiences of Jews in one small town, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, contrast and compare with metropolitan patterns of adjustment during the same time period.

Ewa Morawska posits two audiences: general readers interested in immigration and American Jewish history, and scholars in sociology and history. For the latter, theory and methodology (including Clifford Geertz, Raymond Williams, and Pierre Bourdieu) are delineated in a few pages of the preface and in Appendix I, where the author describes the theoretical foundations of her study and how she came to espouse them. However, the preface excepted, the book is more difficult than it should be for the general reader (a group including this reviewer, who is not a sociologist or literary theorist), given the author's intention. Sentences are ponderous with qualifying clausal structure, larded with phrases such as "schemas-resources," "collective referent," and "winning-American-style life orientations." There is also repetition, both of conclusions and of the evidence on which they are based. Morawska herself refers to the reader, late in the book, as having been "plowing through" the text.

One who does "plow through," however, can learn an enormous amount from the author's meticulous historical research and sociological fact-gathering about the experience of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe and America: their skills, religious and communal support, the pressures they faced as an entrepreneurial minority in America, and their coping strategies.

In an opening chapter on the shtetl origins of Johnstown Jews, Morawska makes a nice distinction between agrarian and somewhat more agrarian towns. Using evidence about the origins of Johnstowners based on memoirs and interviews, the author contrasts and compares their experience with what previous scholars have said about ambivalent attitudes of peasants toward Jews, about a Jewish sense of superiority to, and suspi-

cion of, "goys," about the importance of *taklis* (sense of purpose, and effort directed at a perceived destiny). Her interviews give fresh evidence of how fragile were the successes of the middleman, despite his dedication to family and God, in a society that saw him as an outsider.

The goals and accomplishments of the Johnstown community, considered in light of the interwar period's boom and bust, are carefully shown to have been less ambitious, and to have resulted in less anxiety--despite the "insecure prosperity" of her subjects--than those of Jews in metropolitan East Coast areas. She is aware that Johnstown, as a steel and coal center with declining prosperity after World War I, is not characteristic of all small towns, so she makes no false claims about the universality of her findings, which are important in any case. With little occupational mobility, Jews tended to live from one generation to the next in the same neighborhoods and to follow in family occupations: clothing, jewelry, furniture, dry goods. Not nearly as many went to college as in big cities. Most Johnstown Jews did not want to venture outside the family businesses to find new kinds of jobs. The majority of financial arrangements were made through the cooperation of fellow ethnics (that is, via a vertical structure). As contrasted to New York City's Jews, those in Johnstown were not as secularized or as rebellious against parents and traditions, and they were not ostentatious in dress or extravagant spenders. They were not seen as parvenus. In this part of the discussion, it would have been helpful to refer to the analysis, by Walter Zenner, Edna Bonachich, and others, of the ethnic middleman, and of their problems, such as "weak money," political vulnerability, and the "vertical structure" of the profession.

Several chapters concern Jewish behavior as part of the ethnic community and their participation in the social and political milieu of the town. It is one of the author's guiding premises that to study the social life of a people is to understand their culture and how both the culture and the social milieu organize their lives. She finds, again, less dislocation from one generation to the next than in big cities regarding the way Jews allied themselves with the synagogue, sought leisure-time pursuits, and aspired to educational advancement. She is very good on the self-image and sense of vulnerability of Jewish people in both metropolitan and small-town communities.

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