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George William Shea. *Spoiled Silk: The Red Mayor and the Great Paterson Textile Strike.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2001. xii + 205 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2134-9; $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2133-2.

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Biographical Fiction

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George W. Shea's *Spoiled Silk: The Red Mayor and the Great Paterson Textile Strike* is a piece of family history–the story of the author's German-born maternal grandparents, William Brueckmann and Katherine Ruhren. It is, in Shea's words, a "two-fold tale" (p. x). On the one hand, there is William's and Katherine's anti-climactic personal history: their emigration from their native Rhineland region in Germany, their settlement in Haledon, New Jersey, their material prosperity and personal losses. At the same time, *Spoiled Silk* gives an account of William Brueckmann's political activities and his involvement in the Great Paterson Textile Strike. *Spoiled Silk* is not, however, as the title might lead one to expect, a book about the Paterson strike, or even about a facet of U.S. socialism. Nor is it primarily the contribution to German-American Studies that the publisher has cast it to be in the promotional blurb. Rather, Shea's choice of sources, scope, methodology, and narrative voice make *Spoiled Silk* a highly readable work of biographical fiction.

Shea's story progresses chronologically, starting in the 1890s, when the Brueckmann and Ruhren families emigrated to the United States from Krefeld, Germany. Both families being weavers, they took work in the silk mills of Haledon, New Jersey. Not long after their wedding in 1899, William Brueckmann and Katherine Ruhren left the mills to open a boarding house for mill workers in Haledon. After the birth of their second child, Helen (the author's mother), the Brueckmann family decided to sell the boarding house and open a convenience store–a business that would expand over the years and bring the family considerable prosperity. A miscarriage flung Katherine into a depression from which she never quite recovered; the loss also marked the beginning of the couple's estrangement from each other.

In 1912, William, who was familiar with Karl Marx and "socialist pamphlets" (p. 19), successfully ran for mayor for the Socialist Party. He subsequently served as mayor of Haledon from 1912 to 1918, and again from 1924 to 1928. In 1913, during his first term, rumors of the impending introduction of the four-loom system (an improved loom which allowed one worker to do what then still required four) threatened to put 75 percent of the workers out of work, thus setting off strikes in the Paterson mills which soon spread around the area. When Big Bill Haywood's Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) stepped in to organize the protests in 1913, Paterson authorities attempted to crush the strike by arresting the leaders and prohibiting further assemblies within Paterson township. William Brueckmann agreed to host the meetings on Haledon territory, making possible a labor movement in which 25,000 workers shut down about 300 mills for five months. Nevertheless, the strike eventually failed without having gained significant improvements in working conditions. As Shea stresses, for William this meant the collapse of his political ideal, which left him disillusioned.

A second setback for the family that Shea highlights is the substance-abuse problem of William's and Katherine's eldest child, their son Billy. It led to his premature death at twenty-eight, leaving his parents melancholy and guilt-ridden and pulling them further apart from each other. After Billy's death, William and Katherine settled into a quiet routine. They continued to run the store, while William took on lesser municipal responsibilities. At the end of World War II, they retired from business and public life. William died in the 1950s follow-

ing the amputation of his leg; Shea concludes his story with Katherine's death in 1970.

Shea has chosen a fictional approach to writing his family history. "My grandmother was a great storyteller," he says when outlining his sources in the beginning, "and the accounts of her evening storytelling are not fiction" (p. xi). It is precisely this view that there is truth to fiction that *could* have been which informs Shea's own storytelling: "I have tried ... to capture their thoughts and views as best I could, not making things up, but when needed, putting into their mouths the words I believe they would have spoken" (p. xi). Consequently, he refers to his text as a "tale" (p. x), "memoir" (p. ix), and "tragedy" (p. x), and to his first-person voice as the "narrator" (p. 203). This makes Shea's narrative an accessible and enjoyable read, but it is also the origin of some of the academic weaknesses of his book.

The way in which Shea has chosen to incorporate his sources does not cater to the needs of readers with an academic interest in the matter. The supporting documentation he mentions throughout his text is vast, including newspaper reports, public records, family documents, oral interviews, and the autobiography of August Ruhren, Katherine's brother. Yet at no point does Shea make reference to the precise source of a particular piece of information, give a citation, or even quote. There are no notes, and the volume does not contain a bibliography. By thus relinquishing the verifiability of his data in favor of accessibility, Shea makes his considerable research efforts inaccessible to other researchers.

Spoiled Silk also privileges sentiment over historicity. As a result, dates of events (the year of emigration, Billy's death, or William's death) are often omitted; first names dropped; places, organizations, events, and characters glossed over and not contextualized. While an entire chapter is dedicated to the fictional rendering of William's alleged love affair ("A Visit to Morrissee Avenue," pp. 134-140), no context is established to situate the emigration of the Brueckmann and Ruhren families in the socio-economic and political situation in Germany during the 1890s. Their immigration to the United States is not put in relation to either the history of immigration from Germany or a general history of immigration to the United States in the 1890s. The status of U.S. socialism in 1913 is as little elaborated on as the impact immigration had on it. The Paterson strike is discussed as an isolated incident rather than one of many milestones of the U.S. labor movement. Juicy details like William Brueckmann's acquaintance with Trotsky, deplorably, remain unexamined. More attention to historical detail and context could have given credence to Shea's introductory claim that his grandparents' story "raises ... larger social and ethical issues that still haunt the U.S. culture, its economic life, and its political system" (p. x). As it is, the biographies of William and Katherine Brueckmann are suspended in a timeless zone of melodrama which, rather than appreciating their particular achievements, erases them.

The fictional narrative itself suffers from technical inconsistencies which prove counterproductive to Shea's task of commemorating his grandparents' plight. The most striking among them is Shea's tendency to essentialize and stereotype his characters, e.g. his man "with a wrinkled German face" (p. 16) and his numerous references to the "tons of wurst and potato salad and more beer" (p. 17), the "strong German coffee" (p. 31), or the songs of the "old country" (p. 17) which his German characters prefer. Leitmotifs such as William Brueckmann's recurring comment, "nonsense," get dangerously close to producing stock characters and are often used to effect comic relief. An example occurs when William is forced to attend a costume party: " '*Unsinn*,' my grandfather no doubt said when his wife tied the kerchief around his neck" (p. 25). The use of comical devices like these further subverts Shea's larger tragic theme. Also, Shea chooses to abandon critical distance in *Spoiled Silk* in favor of eulogizing William and Katherine Brueckmann. Their uprightness is never questioned. The ensuing nostalgia and romanticizing cements the melodramatic structure of the book while undermining its historical component.

Contrary to the publisher's contention on the back cover of *Spoiled Silk* that "the recent interest in immigration to America has tended to overlook the largest group of immigrants, the German Americans," George W. Shea's new book joins a number of recent contributions to the field, both generic and biographical. Pertaining to the various issues raised in *Spoiled Silk* is Robert McCaffery's book *Islands of Deutschtum* (previously reviewed on GAGCS), which is of special interest for the role of Germans in the U.S. textile industry.[1] *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, edited by Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, is a collection of essays on left-radical ideas and figures among the many other groups that have immigrated to the United States, and its impact on the U.S. left.[2] Finally, the series *German-Americans in the World Wars*, edited by Don Tolzmann and currently comprising eight volumes, is a good source of general information and case studies on German immigrants in the first half