

Dan Rottenberg, ed.. *Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997. xxxiv + 142 pp. \$19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-33243-1.



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When sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd studied Muncie, Indiana, for their groundbreaking anthropological studies of Muncie, *Middletown* and *Middletown in Transition*, there was one segment of the population that was scarcely discussed. The Jews of Muncie, numbering approximately two hundred, did not play an important role in the Lynds' story. In fact, the Lynds dismissed them with the comment that the Jewish community was "so small as to be numerically negligible" (p. vii). This was not just happenstance, for the Lynds, interested in homogeneity, were looking for a town whose population was primarily American-born and Protestant, with few minorities or foreign-born (p. xvi). They were also seeking to study an industrial society, and the Jews, engaged mostly in small businesses, did not fit the studies criteria.

In 1979, Martin Schwartz, a native-born Jewish resident of Muncie, observed that the Jewish community was changing as the small businessmen were retiring and many of the next generation were seeking opportunities elsewhere. He sought to record the existence of the Jews of Middletown as well as to discover how Jews managed

their lives in a town where, as the book's editor concludes in his preface, Jews were visible enough to provoke anti-Semitism but too small to support a permanent rabbi. Schwartz commissioned Ball State University professors C. Warren Vander Hill and Dwight W. Hoover to interview nineteen Jewish residents who lived in the Lynds' Middletown. The interviewees were surprisingly diverse. Although most of the interviewees were practicing Jews, some reform and others Orthodox, a few interviewees had left Judaism, and one interviewee was the Christian wife of a deceased Muncie Jew. While some of the interviewees had left Muncie by the time of the interviews, all lived in the city during the 1920s and 1930s, the years of the Lynds' research. Complete transcripts of the interviews are available at the Center for Middletown Studies in the Bracken Library at Ball State University.

Middletown Jews, based on the Center for Middletown Studies collection, is a person-by-person history of the former community which attempts to place the Jews of Muncie back in the history of the now mythical Middletown. The transcripts have been "edited for clarity, readability

ity, and avoidance or redundancy," and the editor's comments are easily accessible to the reader in brackets or footnotes (p. xiii). Excerpts of the nineteen interviews, placed in individual chapters, form the main body of the book. The interview chapters are preceded by a thoughtful preface by Dan Rottenberg and an introduction by one of the interviewers, Dwight W. Hoover. Rottenberg sets the interviews in historical context, while Hoover's introduction, a discussion of the community's history, is a reprint of his 1985 article for the *Indiana Magazine of History*, "To Be a Jew in Middletown: A Muncie Oral History Project."

To add structure to the book, Rottenberg characterizes the interviews or the interviewees by placing them in chapters with titles including "An Instinct for Survival," "Muncie Will Always be Home to Me," and "The Gentile Wife." Each chapter is arranged in basically the same order with an asterisk separating different, yet unlabeled, topics: personal history, family history, the Jewish community, religion at home, social activities, Jewish and non-Jewish relations, the Klan and anti-Semitism, the congregation, and finally, hopes for the future of the community.

Most of Muncie's Jewish community immigrated from Germany, eastern Europe, or the larger cities of the eastern United States. They were attracted to the city because of its economic opportunities, becoming the merchants of Walnut Street, the central shopping district. Although rarely able to support a permanent rabbi, Muncie's Jews did build a synagogue, form communal organizations, and sustain a religious school for their children's education. In this respect, they were not all that different from other small Jewish communities throughout the Midwest and West. However, Muncie's Jews did face some unusual circumstances that made the community's survival questionable enough to justify Rottenberg's subtitle, "The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community." For Muncie's Jews

lived in a state that had a Jewish population of only 21,000, or four-tenths of one percent of the state's population, (p. ix), as well as a large Ku Klux Klan. Therefore, the community was isolated, usually struggling for cohesion and survival.

Several themes were common to most interviews, including the struggle for economic security, the survival of the community, Jewish-Gentile relations, and the tensions between Orthodox, Reform and secular members of the community. Overlaying these issues is the central question of how the community managed to co-exist in a town where Ku Klux Klan members were also town leaders. The most insightful sections of the interviews are those devoted to Jewish-non-Jewish relations and anti-Semitism. The Lynds believed that most of Muncie felt that "individual Jews may be all right but that as a race one doesn't care to mix too much with them" (p. x).

Some of the interviews bear out the fact of their social ostracism, document active discrimination against them, and give insight into the different ways Muncie's Jews had of facing prejudices. While some interviewees openly discuss the town's anti-Semitism or Klan activities, most diminish their experience of personal slights. Many of the interviewees state that they faced little discrimination but then follow that statement with an example of ostracism. One interviewee claims that she "felt very well accepted by [her] acquaintances ... and never felt ... excluded from anything because of [her] religion" (p. 76). However, she also recalls, "I don't remember ever being asked to join any of the clubs or sororities in high school" (p. 76). Another interviewee first stated that the anti-Semitism he felt was just "a social thing—I wasn't invited to parties that I would expect to be invited to. That's really about it" (p. 3). He continued, however, "when it came to housing, Westwood was always closed to our people, and Kenmore was at one time. Those were the two best residential neighborhoods" (p. 3). Reading these accounts of the coping mechanisms

Muncie's Jews developed is far more powerful than reading a secondary account of anti-Semitism in the city.

While many significant questions and much valuable information is contained in the interviews, the book's format does not make their discussion easily accessible. No matter the importance of the content, it is through organization and presentation that books using interview transcripts demonstrate their strength. Sometimes, if the individual stories are dramatic, as in Ruth Wolman's *Crossing Over*, interviews with refugees who fled Nazi Europe, a person-by-person history can work; however, in the case of *Middletown Jews* this method leads to problems with repetition both of information previously stated in the introduction and of material almost identical to other interviews. Since the excerpts were divided by topic, the book might have had a greater impact for the reader if it had labeled sections with titles such as "Anti-Semitism," "The Ku Klux Klan," and "Jewish-Gentile Relations." In this way responses could have placed side-by-side for comparison, as was the format in *From the Old Country* by Bruce Stave and John Sutherland, or separated by reoccurring topics as in *Witnesses to the Holocaust* by Rhoda Lewin. An additional problem for the reader is the lack of information about how the interviews were conducted and structured. Because the interviewers' questions were removed from the transcripts, it is impossible to know exactly what questions were asked and how these questions may have influenced the interviewee's response.

However, as a reviewer it is easy to second-guess an editor, and it is evident that he spent much time and thought deciding how best to present the interviews. The editor must be complimented for introducing each interview with a paragraph in italics which summarizes the interviewee's background, in some cases noting where the interviewee was living and what he or she was doing at the time of the interview, and for

supplying photographs of the community which help the reader put a face on most of the individuals, showing them in their work places or during Jewish community events such as confirmations or at a Bar Mitzvah.

The methodology of book editing is different from the methodology of oral history collection, and as is the case in most books based on oral history a review of the book cannot be complete without a thank-you to the oral historians for creating the project that researched, collected, transcribed, and placed in an archive a significant part of American Jewish history. These transcripts will be an important building block for historians who seek to create a complete version of American Jewish history, not one that is centered only in the major urban centers. The editor should also be thanked for bringing these interviews out into the open rather than leaving them to gather metaphorical dust in the archive.

"The community may very well vanish from Muncie in the next generation, just as countless small Jewish communities across America have vanished in the second half of the twentieth century," concludes Dan Rottenberg, "but the Jews of Muncie have indeed contributed something important to American Jewish life: a demonstration that Jewish individuals armed with the slenderest human and financial resources can create and sustain a viable Jewish community as they feel the need to do so" (p. xii). For seeking to document this survival, Martin D. Schwartz must be thanked for his initiative in creating an oral history project, and the community itself must also be thanked for participating, as oral historians cannot accomplish their work if potential interviewees do not agree to be interviewed.

Middletown Jews has let readers know about a valuable subject. It is hoped that in the near future historians of the American Jewish community will be able to incorporate its significance into a broader understanding of American Jewry as a whole.

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