

Daniel Soyer. *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. 291 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-44417-1.



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Daniel Soyer's *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939*, having already won a prize for best first book published by Harvard University Press, amply delivers on the promises of this award. Soyer has written a rich, evocative portrait of the varieties of *landsmanshaftn*, the 3,000 hometown associations East European immigrant Jewish men formed in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New York to ease their way into the New World. While some *landsmanshaftn* emphasized sociability, others promised mutual assistance. Some furthered their members' radical politics; others offered a house of prayer and sacred ground for burial. But all, Soyer has persuasively argued, furthered the process of the immigrants' negotiation of their new American Jewish identities.

Soyer's analysis of the *landsmanshaftn* stands apart from prior studies, such as Michael Weissner's *A Brotherhood of Memory*, for Soyer carefully contextualizes the *landsmanshaftn*. He understands these to be East European Jewish manifestations of the myriad associations other immi-

grants, like the Chinese and the Ibo, formed based on village or region of origin. Then he carefully delineates how distinctions among the *shtetlakh*, which gave the *landsmanshaftn* their names, explain their diversity. Knowing whether a yeshivah, Hasidic court, or factory dominated a *shtetl* reveals the Old World context shaping the New World *landsmanshaft*.

But Soyer locates the *landsmanshaftn* in America among the plethora of fraternal orders permeating its society. Understanding that a vast array of American organizations took on the trappings of these secret societies, he shows the immigrant fraternities doing the same. In creating initiation rituals, such as one modeled on the binding of Isaac, the Grand Masters and their brothers invented new "ethnic traditions" blending their Jewish and American identities. Such rituals, foreign to the Jewish past, prove that the *landsmanshaftn* "reflected the influences of the surrounding culture more clearly than they mirrored Jewish communal traditions (or innovations) in Eastern Europe" (p. 30). Similarly, in the *landsmanshaft* shul democratic principles triumphed resulting in the

primacy of lay over rabbinic leadership, thus revealing another marker of America.

Soyer maintains that in other respects landsmanshaftn acceded to American influence. Although landsmanshaftn restricted membership to men, women nevertheless participated to a far greater extent than they had in traditional East European Jewish organizations. Affirming that modern historical scholarship demands the refraction of the prism of gender, Soyer has paid careful attention to the women who waited for their husbands to conclude landsmanshaftn business before joining them for sociability and to the widows who relied upon the associations' death benefits. The landsmanshaftn thus sustained immigrant men and women economically and emotionally.

Finally, Soyer argues that the landsmanshaftn never stood as the "backward 'oases' of passive insularity" (p. 141) depicted by other scholars, including Irving Howe. To the contrary, the historian presents a wide array of evidence from the plethora of communal activities and projects which engaged various landsmanshaftn. Whether they worked with the New York Kehillah, the labor movement, or the immigrant aid society HIAS, or linked arms with the Joint Distribution Committee to relieve the suffering of *landslayt* stranded in war-torn Europe, landsmanshaftn myriad involvements confirms Soyer's assessment. Passionately engaged with all movements and causes of their day, the landsmanshaftn constituted a microcosm of New York's immigrant Jewish world.

But as immigration ended in the interwar years, and later as East European Jewry perished and the State of Israel emerged to transform modern Jewry, the landsmanshaftn, their members aging, changed as well. Longing for a time when once they were young, the members, now increasingly joined by their wives, engaged in "new exercises in memory" (p. 191). On the surface these seemed to tie the landsmanshaftn more closely to the world that was no more. But, indeed, the nos-

talgie reminiscing highlighted the distance the immigrants had traveled as they made New York their home.

With an eye for telling detail, Soyer's illumination of the world of the landsmanshaftn should stand as a model for all those engaged in the study of immigration and ethnicity. I, for one, eagerly look forward to this scholar's future work.

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