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Lee Weissbach. *A Jewish Life on Three Continents: The Memoir of Menachem Mendel Frieden.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013. 517 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-8620-1.

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Shortly after his 1904 arrival in Norfolk, Virginia, the Lithuanian-born Menachem Mendel Frieden opened a grocery store outside the city which served the black clientele in that area. New to America and hardly speaking any English, Frieden recalled that he was terrified of blacks "whenever I saw them, since one has to become accustomed to these black-skinned people. I had never before seen people of this color, their behavior brutish and lacking in manners." Frieden mentioned that among his family members and friends, "The assumption was that every black was a thief and a murderer," and described how he "shook all over with fear": "Their faces were the faces of savages, their eyes protruding and frightening," and "these blacks will take advantage of you when they see that you're afraid. They steal merchandise and tell you to shut up" (pp. 230-231).

Frieden's portrayal of Jewish immigrants' relations with African Americans in the American South, fraught with suspicion and prejudice, is merely one example of the multidimensional character of his recollection. A memoir that marries the story of growing up in a Lithuanian shtetl and studying in different yeshivot with the experience of immigration to the United States and working as a peddler and storekeeper in the American South and Minnesota, and finally settling in the Land of Israel in 1921, is quite rare. Very few memoirs and autobiographies tie together not only three continents, but also different aspects of modern Jewish life as Frieden's fascinating account does.[1]

Numerous Jewish immigrants composed their recollections, yet those were never published. Menachem Mendel Frieden's memoir would probably have shared the same fate if not for his grandson, the historian Lee Shai Weissbach, who meticulously translated from the Hebrew, edited, annotated, and added an introduction to each of the chapters in his maternal grandfather's memoir. As Weissbach correctly reminds us, there is a myriad of autobiographical writings about Jewish life in Eastern Europe (Tsarist Russia, Habsburg-ruled Galicia, and Romania), the immigrant experience in America, and the early stages of the Zionist Yishuv in the Land of Israel. Still, the vast majority of those accounts usually describe life in the Old World, the travel experience, and then the new land (whether it was the United States, where the largest number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Eastern European Jews would end up, or the Land of Israel, Argentina, Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and South Africa, among others). Occasionally the memoirists' focus would shift to a third country, such as Britain or Canada, which were common

stopovers en route to New York, or Germany or Switzerland, whose universities hosted vibrant communities of Zionist, Diaspora nationalist, and radical émigrés. But a life story that merges together Eastern Europe, the United States, and the Yishuv is indeed uncommon.

Born to a traditional family in the small town of Kvatki (Kovno Province) in 1878, Frieden reviewed his family's preceding generations before moving to a comprehensive description of shtetl life: the preparations for Passover and the holiday cycle, studying in a ***cheder***, and the town's social stratification, where bathhouse attendants would "bend down and remove the shoes of rich men, and their pants, so the wealthy would not have to stoop down to accomplish this themselves" (p. 81). The chapter that deals with matchmakers, courtship, and marriage is very illuminating, regardless of the memoirist's frequent pedagogical detours. Interestingly, while mentioning that he "did not know a woman until my first wedding night," Frieden also confessed to something that many authors of his generation might have kept private: his difficulty to control his "sexual excitation" as a single young man, which resulted in "many a nocturnal emission" (p. 180).

The young Frieden went on to study in two yeshivot (in Dvinsk and Lyady) and his narrative explains the system of "eating days"--when students were supported by the community that sent them to eat their meals in rotation at the tables of various households. That recollection is peppered with Frieden's account of how he discovered that one of his beneficiaries was a woman who worked as a prostitute in a brothel in Dvinsk. The yeshiva years were when the thirst for secular knowledge, Hebrew culture, and Zionism began to grow in the young student's mind. Frieden ascribed that beginning to Abraham Mapu's novel ***Ahavat Tsiyon*** (Love of Zion, 1853), which "inspired me to acquire secular knowledge" and "perhaps this book is to blame for my giving up the goal I had set for myself … the rabbinate" (p. 173). Yet as Marcus Moseley has commented, numerous maskilic autobiographies mention Mapu's "lascivious biblical romance" as a turning point in their lives, and it is quite possible that Frieden unwittingly integrated that motif into his own memoir.[2] Weissbach points to the influence of the Haskalah literature and its patterns on Frieden, and how "certain passages in Frieden's memoir are strikingly similar to parallel passages" in the autobiography of the Zionist leader Shmaryahu Levin (p. xvi).

Frieden would drop out of the yeshiva, engage in several business ventures, and get married before making the decision (in 1904) to immigrate to America (not long after his marriage). His reasoning exemplifies the diverse set of circumstances that led to immigration: the fear of being drafted into the Russian army (especially amid talk about a looming war against Japan), the importance of chain migration (three of Frieden's brothers were already in America), the reduced cost of transatlantic travel due to the competition between shipping companies, and perhaps most importantly, Frieden's admission that he did not manage to "find some reasonable station in life," i.e., succeed in a business that would allow him and his wife to settle down (pp. 220-221).

Whereas he lived in the United States for nearly two decades (1904-21), Frieden dedicated relatively few pages (two chapters out of eighteen) to that period. Those years, however, witnessed some of the most dramatic events in his life: the death of his first wife, Etel, in 1911, shortly after giving birth to their second daughter; his courtship and then marriage to his second wife, Ray (the couple had two more children); and his decision to immigrate to Israel. Those chapters offer a wealth of information about the Jewish immigrant experience in the American South, Jewish peddlers' life on the road, and the relations with African American clients. Frieden recounted that upon his arrival in America, "people were friendly toward me" and he "was very much impressed

by the equality between people" (pp. 222, 227). Years later, when he looked back at his life in America, he modified his view, writing, "the more one lives in America and the more one comes in contact with the non-Jews there … the more the freedom that prevails in America appears to be, in fact, less pure, as far as Jews are concerned" (p. 285).

That sense of disillusionment had much to do with Frieden's avid Zionism and was formulated in retrospect, as he explained the reasons for leaving America and immigrating to the Land of Israel. Frieden devoted the longest chapter (which Weissbach has divided into three) to his years in the Yishuv between 1923 and 1947, when he left for an extended visit to America: he detailed the work of Americans in Israel, as well as his own work for the Loan Bank, one of the chief American initiatives that developed the fledgling Yishuv's economy. In one of the memoir's most intense episodes, Frieden related his experience during the Arab riots of 1929, when an Arab mob in Jerusalem tried to break down the door to the building where he worked, as he and his colleagues "hurried to the roof and began hurling stones at the Arabs and they retreated from our door" (pp. 343-344). Frieden would remain deeply committed to the Zionist movement, and apart from a couple of visits to America, he stayed in Israel until his death in 1963.

To what extent is Frieden's memoir a useful historical source? Several scholars (whose work Weissbach has utilized) have pointed to the challenging nature of memoirs and autobiographies: gaps in memory and an ideological agenda are often joined by a retroactive twist that is meant to convey a larger meaning. In Frieden's case, it is not just his ardent Zionism, but also his recurring pedagogical digressions and repeated apologia (providing justifications at different points for his decision to include this or that part) which demonstrate the tricky task of using memoir literature as a valid historical source. In addition, the original handwritten Hebrew manuscript was discarded after a mimeographed transcription of it was made back in the 1960s. Weissbach's translation is based on the mimeographed version, and he admits that "it is impossible to know how exactly the existing Hebrew version follows the handwritten original" (p. xxix).

Those qualifications notwithstanding, Frieden's memoir is a valuable historical source, which brings to light a wide range of topics that are rarely to be found in one account: family life in a small shtetl, Hasidic-Misnagdic tensions, matchmaking and courtship in traditional Jewish society, the effect of chain migration to America, the life of Jewish peddlers in the American South, and the experience of an urban, entrepreneurial pioneer in the interwar Yishuv. One may quibble over some of Weissbach's editorial decisions: though in his journal Frieden criticized the movie ***Gentleman's Agreement*** (1947), which dealt with antisemitism in American society, Weissbach chose to omit that part (p. 427). It would have been very interesting to read the perspective of a Zionist like Frieden, who was also very critical of the "affluent and raucous" postwar Jewish life in America (p. 430).

Still, Frieden's memoir is a fascinating and useful narrative about Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the United States, and the Land of Israel, and his literary skill will help to make this memoir accessible to non-academic readers. Weissbach has made a significant contribution by adeptly translating and making this illuminating historical source available to the English-language readership.

Notes

[1]. A similar life trajectory--growing up in Eastern Europe and immigrating to the United States and later to pre-independence Israel--can be found in the memoir of a leader of Labor Zionism: Borekh Tsukerman, ***Zikhroyne***, 3 volumes (New York: Yidisher Kemfer, 1962-1966).

[2]. Marcus Moseley, ***Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography*** (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 449.