REVIEW ESSAY

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Generations of Memories: Voices of Jewish Women Edited by the Jewish Women in London Group *The Women's Press: London 1989, £6.95 Pbk, ISBN 0 7043 4205 7*

The Jewish community is held up as *the* example of how immigrants can (and should) 'integrate' and 'succeed'. A picture is drawn of a homogeneous group of people who, through a tradition of hard work and mutual self-help, have moved 'up' from the poor inner cities to the green suburbs where they merge in with the surrounding middle classes and keep their distinctive customs to themselves. Jews who were left behind, along with those who wear traditional Hassidic clothes, lesbian and gay Jews, and those who dissent, particularly on Zionism or religious issues, are carefully cropped out of the picture.

But the new decade has brought a wave of attacks on Jewish people and property unprecedented since the war. In Eastern Europe neo-Nazis are marching and speaking openly as political stones are overturned. In Western Europe swastikas and anti-Semitic violence are becoming a regular feature of everyday life in some areas.

Jewish responses to these events reflect conflicts within the community: the struggle for power and ideas; the struggle for the right to define Jewish identity and the struggle to define how the Jewish community relates to the surrounding communities. When graves were smashed and daubed at a north London Jewish cemetery, the Chief Rabbi said: 'I think it would be wrong to over-dramatize these events. It would only feed the mills of anti-Semitism.' (*Independent on Sunday*, 10 June 1990). The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the community's political Establishment, said, tortuously: 'We are not looking at a rise in anti-Semitism, but an increase in anti-Semitic incidents.' (*Independent on Sunday*, 10 June 1990).

This attempt to play down, deprive of meaning and even, at times, lie about anti-Semitic attacks, is part of a wider attempt to maintain the image of a secure, comfortable community living in harmony with its

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neighbours. The communal leaders use political and religious orthodoxy to define the limits of the community and the limits of Jewish identity. Jewish children are brought up to believe that breaking ranks or misbehaving brings trouble for all Jews, and dissenting adults are told that they have no place in the community despite anxiety being widely expressed about Jews being 'lost' through assimilation.

A visible place in the Jewish community requires a high degree of conformity and an acceptance of one or both of two defining characteristics: religion or Zionism. Anyone who belongs to neither a synagogue nor a Zionist organization does not figure in the communal statistics and is not represented on the Board of Deputies. If, in addition, they express dissenting views on other issues, such as how to confront anti-Semitism, they are also refused platforms in the community and silenced in the Jewish press. In effect, they are driven out of the community. Or they may be co-opted.

At the same time, there is a long history of radicalism amongst Jews. Socialist, feminist and liberation movements have attracted disproportionate numbers of Jewish activists and, until the Second World War, radical Jews organized prominently *within* the community, as Jewish anarchists and Jewish socialists, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe, but also in the West. The predicament of 'the Jew in the modern world' has preoccupied the intellectual and radical elements within the community since the French Revolution, but, while a degree of debate in certain contexts and within restricted parameters has been acceptable to the establishment, the proposal of any progressive solutions is quickly stifled. In particular, attempts to understand anti-Semitism in relation to other forms of oppression and to forge alliances with other oppressed or persecuted communities, or with political groups confronting that oppression or persecution, are outlawed. The result for many Jews has been a sense of alienation from Jewish life and a 'decision' to move away from the community and towards more like-minded people outside.

Generations of Memories, edited by the Jewish Women in London Group (1989), reflects dimensions of Jewish life which the communal establishment finds uncongenial. The book is one product of the Jewish Women in London Project set up in 1984 with funding from the GLC to record the life-stories of Jewish women through oral testimonies. The eight women who speak through this book are linked through their history of migration. Some were refugees from the Nazis; others were the daughters of those who fled the Tsarist Russian Empire at the turn of the century. As well as feeling, in some cases literally, misplaced in British society, they also share a feeling of being misplaced in the Jewish community; of being under pressure to conceal the real person under a conformist façade.

Britain has what one progressive rabbi has called 'a long history of absorbing immigrants so they disappear without trace'. But Jewish immigrants in this century have also been coerced by their own communal establishments into merging in with their surroundings.

Ruth Adler was born in 1912 within months of her parents' arrival from Poland. Her family's struggle against poverty was a powerful motivation for her to 'move on' and 'become British'. But there was equally strong pressure from inside the Jewish community. Taken back to Poland as a baby, she and her mother were stuck there after the First World War broke out, so she spoke only Yiddish until she was seven. She says: 'English is my second language. For quite a while my parents and I spoke to each other in Yiddish but then a teacher said to me, "If you want to learn English you must speak English and *dream* in English." . . . I took her advice and stopped speaking Yiddish.' (p. 31) Only then does she reveal that this was a *Jewish* school which was telling her to cut herself off from her natural and fluent means of expression, from her home, her culture and her history.

At that time Yiddish was spoken by millions of Jews across Europe. It was the language of working-class Jews, not of the Jewish bourgeoisie, who spoke the language of the countries they lived in. German Jews spoke German; Polish Jews spoke Polish. The British Jewish establishment consisted of Sephardim who had originated in Spain and had been settled in Britain for enough generations to have become, like George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, part of the local aristocracy. Ena Abrahams's childhood in London's East End would have been as alien to them as it was to the non-Jewish upper classes:

When I was six. . . I went to Fairclough Street School. There they were nearly all Jewish children. We used to do a double session on Friday, finish early and my grandmother used to meet me at school. She used to carry with her a straw bag with food in it, and we used to go *straight away* to the cinema, either to the Rivoli or the Palaseum; the place would be full of children and grown-ups, mostly grandparents or mothers. It was terribly noisy, because we used to do simultaneous translation! In *fact*, most of us were bilingual. I would read the captions in English – it was silent you see, the talkies were only just coming in – and translate them into Yiddish. The grown-ups used to bring food in case the children died of hunger, so everybody was eating. (p. 86)

The influx of such poor, working-class Jews, many of them bringing revolutionary ideas from Russia and Poland, was a clear threat to the Jewish establishment's carefully constructed image and relationship with the British state. There were – and are – similar manifestations of class conflict in other Jewish communities. Rita Altman was born in Germany in 1922 to Polish parents who had entered Germany illegally in 1919:

It's well known now that when the *Ostjuden* came to Germany, German Jews thought, my God, they're spoiling it for us now. The division was very clearly felt; my father went to the *shtiebel* [small synagogue, usually in someone's home], to the *shul*, and they went with their high hats to

synagogue. . . We felt it very strongly, that division. It's like chapel and church isn't it? (p. 116)

In Britain the upper- and middle-class establishment did not encourage Yiddish-speaking Jews to come. Indeed, they co-operated in turning some back to face persecution under the Tsar, then concentrated on keeping those who did come under control.

Their success was only partial. Many of those immigrants became socialists and, later, feminists. The *Arbeiter Ring* or Workers' Circle, was an important factor in the political development of many progressive Jews in the 1930s. As well as fulfilling, in a secular setting, many social and material needs that would otherwise only have come from religious institutions (it operated as a burial society, for instance) the Workers' Circle was a nonsectarian forum for a wide range of social, political, cultural and educational activities incorporating anarchists, communists and Zionists as well as the Bundists who largely founded it. Though they finally sold their building only five years ago, few young Jews today have even heard of the Workers' Circle. *Generations of Memories* uncovers this rich communal resource which encouraged and enabled thousands of progressive Jews to defend themselves, to express themselves and to act politically, as well as providing a place for them to relax and move beyond the confines of their families. Ruth Adler remembers:

My husband came to this country from Poland, where he had been a member of the illegal Communist Party. In the Progressive Youth Circle (a group within the Workers' Circle) which he and another comrade set up in the late twenties, there were all sorts of young people: communists, anarchists, socialists, Zionists and non-Party people who were interested in political matters. We used to thrash things out in lectures and discussions. It was a marvellous time for me. . . I was about 16 or so. A new life opened, an intellectual life, people hammering out their ideas. It was meat and drink to me. (p. 33)

When Mosley's British Union of Fascists threatened the people of east London in the 1930s, the community leaders told the Jews to stay indoors and draw the shutters (Rosenberg, 1985). They didn't. Many, like several of the women in *Generations of Memories*, joined the Communist Party which, whatever its other weaknesses, was facilitating alliances between threatened groups in the area in order to challenge the fascists on the streets.

The communal leaders, though, did irreparable ideological damage by making those very people who were defending their community feel that they were not 'proper' Jews. According to the establishment, Judaism, the religion, practised discreetly behind closed doors, was the only characteristic which should distinguish Jews from the surrounding population. Their mother tongue, their literature, theatre, music, food, tradition and, above all, their variety, were all expendable.

Ena Abrahams's father was an atheist, and she sets a uniquely Jewish scene when she describes her family's religious life:

All the festivals were kept up, we had a kosher household but it was mostly based on superstition rather than an understanding of the ethics of religion. We didn't ever discuss religion in our household. Except for my father to say that he believed it all to be hogwash. My mother didn't commit herself either way. . . . They couldn't *really* keep *Shabbes* [the sabbath] because if you worked, Saturday morning was a working morning. Only the governors kept *Shabbes*. The festivals were a great problem because you didn't get paid. . . . But we always had candles on Friday night, and we always had the traditional meal. Don't ask me when my mother ever cooked it.

Of course there were poor Jews who lived according to the letter of the religious law, but this contradicted the pressure to accommodate to the surrounding culture. Whichever way they went they felt they were losing part of themselves.

One way out of the bind was Zionism, a secular route to Jewish identity which seemed to break out of the straitjacket of tradition. Before Hitler's Final Solution and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel, the leadership of the Jewish community in Britain was anti-Zionist. It saw in Zionism a contradiction between its declared loyalty to the British state and the struggle to set up a Jewish state. This was further complicated by the British government's involvement in Palestine at that time. By the time the Second World War was over, though, Zionism and the demand for a Jewish state was proclaimed as a cornerstone of European Jewish identity. In the aftermath of the physical, cultural and political destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Zionism seemed to offer a way of making both sense of those terrible events and a fresh start.

Official Jewish history tells of two thousand years of persecution and misery culminating in Hitler's Final Solution – the destruction of European Jewry; and out of the ashes of Auschwitz rose the Jewish state. Twin events – or rather, two faces of the same event, one pointing backwards, the other forwards (Deutscher, 1968). Into the dustbin of history went the Nazi period, and Zionism was the lid on the top. Now Jews could hold their heads up. The old stereotype was brought out to serve the Zionist cause: never again need Jews stoop and wheedle, speak their peculiar jargon (Yiddish) or feel the shame of the yellow star. Now they had a country of their own; an army of their own and a brand new language, retrieved from their ancient heritage and revamped for the twentieth century.

A cultural battle against the two most widely used languages of the diaspora, Yiddish and Ladino, was intensified and the rapidly developing Israeli culture was used to replace the range of authentic diaspora cultures which were seen to represent, and to have led to, only misery and destruction. The old (effeminate, diaspora) Jew went to the gas

chambers like a lamb to the slaughter. The new (masculine, Israeli) Jew fought back. The only solution to anti-Semitism was to remove yourself or to direct your energies towards supporting Israel so it could defend Jews everywhere.

The Jewish world became Israelocentric, but Israel did not rule it directly. Instead, a declaration of support for Israel became the acid test of a real Jew as pluralism and a diaspora-centred view clashed with the new Zionist orthodoxy, according to which, 'love of Zion' unifies all Jews, overriding conflicts rooted in class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. Today it enables the community's leaders to ignore, silence and even, as has happened recently, physically exclude, those who cannot or will not suppress their criticisms.

Feminists are familiar with the debilitating effects of this kind of exclusion and the degree of support people need to challenge it. *Generations of Memories* was conceived against the background of two strong pressures: from the Jewish community to be Zionist; from the women's movement to be anti-Zionist – pressures which were demonstrated in the aftermath of the row between the Jewish feminists and *Spare Rib* in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The stark contradiction between the Israeli army's inhuman treatment of the Lebanese and Palestinian people and the political struggle against oppression and persecution here became inescapable for many feminist and socialist Zionists. The war in Lebanon forced them to re-examine and confront the received wisdom in the Jewish community that the State of Israel is the only guarantor of Jewish security the world over. Progressive Jews in Israel and the diaspora began to expose and challenge war crimes and human rights abuses; books were written; meetings were held; groups of Jews went to the Palestinian refugee camps to offer support and to publicize what they found there. Most importantly, links were forged between Jewish and Palestinian campaigners which began to subvert the prevailing assumptions that had served the Israeli and diaspora Jewish leadership so well.

Then *Spare Rib* published an article called 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism' which, whatever the merits or demerits of the political position being put, was riddled with basic mistakes (Theodor Herzl, the nineteenth-century founder of political Zionism, became 'Hertzel, a well-known Zionist leader'), simplistically argued (Holocaust analogies, the use of which was, and is, a subject of serious debate among active antiracists and antifascists, casually littered the text) and uncharacteristically authoritarian in tone ('If a woman calls herself a feminist, she should consciously call herself an anti-Zionist').

About forty Jewish feminists of all persuasions, Zionist, non-Zionist and anti-Zionist, wrote to *Spare Rib*, but not one letter was published. This stifling of Jewish criticism of an article explicitly directed at Jewish women was perceived, quite accurately, as anti-Semitic. The *Spare Rib* collective argued that it was not anti-Semitic but anti-Zionist. Clearly the collective was conflating 'Jew' with 'Zionist' in order to silence the lot of them, and the Jewish establishment was delighted because they too

argue that 'Jew' is synonymous with 'Zionist' and the corollary, that anti-Zionism is synonymous with anti-Semitism.

The *Jewish Chronicle*, which bills itself (with some justification) as 'The Organ of the Jewish Community', suddenly gave space to Jewish feminists, even Black and lesbian ones, who otherwise would never have graced its pages (20 May 1983). They were welcomed back into the community, but were not supported in their struggle to analyse and challenge the hostility they faced, because they were not 'allowed' to be in both the Jewish and feminist communities at the same time, and certainly not to link the issues of sexism and anti-Semitism, of homophobia and anti-Black racism, of imperialism and class oppression, all of which were being explored at the time.

Inevitably, emotional as well as political blood was shed; actual and potential alliances came adrift and most have never recovered. Although the mainstream of the Jewish community did not *directly* sustain its hold on many Jewish feminists, a substantial proportion retreated into 'new' religion and/or an apologia for Zionism. The Jewish Feminist Group began to discuss and move on from the issues raised by these events, and some Jewish feminists became active on particular issues such as support for the Palestinian struggle, but a general lack of analysis of how power is located and wielded in the Jewish community meant they could neither challenge that power nor even make contact with women who were not already part of the radical fringe of that community.

The women who speak in *Generations of Memories* similarly do not move beyond the dilemma of identifying as Jewish yet feeling uncomfortable and out of place in the Jewish community. While several of them feel the class conflict within the community, they only challenge it outside, through the trade unions or the Communist Party. In a similar way, while Jewish feminists felt the gender conflict within the community, they only challenged it through the general women's movement where they felt 'safe'. And when it no longer felt safe, they were welcomed in the Jewish community whose establishment was delighted to be able to publicize 'feminist anti-Semitism'.

Miriam Metz, whose story is the final contribution to *Generations of Memories*, demonstrates how this reactive, defensive politics is incapable of either explaining or challenging oppression in any of its manifestations. In the early 1960s, she went to Israel and saw what was being done to the Palestinians. 'From that time onwards,' she says, 'I would have defined myself as an anti-Zionist, until the time of the anti-Semitic reactions following the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon, at which time I turned right back' (p. 224). She went further back still. First she describes her religious education:

Until about the age of eight, alongside primary school I was sent to what I must count as another school, and that was *cheder*. It was a real old-fashioned *cheder*, none of this idea of you learn Hebrew as a modern language. This was really there to teach kids to read from the prayer

book. It was a room crammed with desks and crammed with children – mainly boys; also a group of girls who sat towards one corner. The character who ran it walked about with a cane and the kids sat at desks and chanted. It taught me to read Hebrew from the prayer book at fantastic speed – which I can no longer do.

All of which illustrates, the medium being the message, that her religious education was oppressive, coercive and reactionary. But here's the lesson Miriam Metz draws: 'There is a prizing of being able to read prayer fast, which doesn't mean that you're disrespectful of it, but it's like running towards something, an idea which I find very exciting' (p. 226).

There are complex and important issues to explore about religion, ritual, culture and the nature of minority communities and their institutions, and Miriam Metz touches on these when she describes the support she derived from the religious community when she was bereaved. But when it comes to political injustice, 'anti-Semitism, antilebianism', her response is 'depression' and 'sadness'. Her resistance is only by proxy:

I have the *historical* knowledge that even in periods of greatest depression there are resistances, there are positive things. There is that biblical saying, man does not live by bread alone. Well, woman does not live by struggle alone. If you have a rich culture, if you have a positive perspective on your life as a woman, then no matter how awful your life is, it is worthwhile. (p. 242, my emphasis)

The opium of the masses, to coin a phrase; not a useful means of furthering feminism.

Generations of Memories illustrates conflicts and contradictions facing politically conscious Jewish women. It sets the scene for a challenge to those who hold power both in the Jewish community and outside, but lacks the editorial focus to make that challenge explicit. Nevertheless, for Jewish women to reveal and explore their own experiences, to analyse their own history and political development and to speak out about their struggle to operate in a (sometimes murderously) hostile world is, in itself, healthily subversive.

The very Jewishness of the language, and the femaleness of the recollections, neither sentimentally exploited nor displayed as a museum piece, undercut the prevailing image of Jews as good 'Englishmen'. Rita Altman describes her parents' upward social mobility:

Peddling was very hard work for the parents, especially when mother was pregnant with me. They became a little better off when they began to sell shoes, also with rucksacks. . . Eventually we moved from the attic to a ground floor flat with a tiny little shop. We had a nice big room with a kitchen and access to a courtyard. They actually bought furniture, not big

but nice, painted white with black beading, a mirror in the middle of the wardrobe, a washstand, an ottoman sofa with a plush cover thrown over it, a radio. How happy mother was then. I remember her making gefilte fish, bringing a carp home from the market, still alive, and pursuing it on the table. 'Oy, kim aher! Oy,' she'd say, 'Kim aher! Ah!' [Come here.] And she'd knock it on the head, poor fish. (p. 108)

But the book founders on the same reef as the Jewish feminist movement as a whole. Innumerable *individual* Jewish feminists have developed a sophisticated analysis of Zionism and religion and have concluded that the oppression of Jews can only be challenged alongside and in alliance with other groups. In attempting to make those alliances they have been pushed out of the Jewish community. The *Spare Rib* affair faced Jewish feminists with a classic choice: to speak out against other feminists and be accused of betraying their sisters, or to continue to struggle within the women's movement and be accused of betraying their community.

The assumption is that both the women's movement and the Jewish community (and there are close parallels in other minority communities) are homogeneous and beleaguered groups, unified by the threats they face. But they are not unified. In different ways they are riven by conflicts which must be fought out and resolved before those groups can serve the needs of their members. The degree to which people feel threatened by the idea of speaking out against injustice is a measure of the spuriousness of that unity and the urgency of challenging those who use it as an ideological weapon to control the group. The challengers need support and organization, strategy and tactics. They need to understand not only where they are, but also where they are going and how to get there.

Generations of Memories sets the scene, describing the often painful problems of radical Jews. The editors opted for a 'broad focus' in order to reflect 'the range and diversity of Jewish women's experiences and. . . to explore the ways in which Jewish women's identities are constructed and developed within and against historical and life events' (p. 8), in order to challenge stereotyped assumptions about Jewish women. But missing from the long and rather uneven introduction to the book is an analysis of power inside or outside the Jewish community: an understanding of whose interests are served by preserving the stereotype and how they maintain it in the face of Jewish women's real lives. The editorial group takes an 'apolitical' stance, not recognizing that this is an ideological device to neutralize and outlaw any effective challenge to the structures that keep the powerful in power. So they are left in the odd situation of talking to women whose lives have been coloured either by their commitment to political activity or by a clear understanding of the cataclysmic political events which determined their experiences, whilst deciding not to talk to them directly about their political views:

We did not wish to impose our own political agendas on the women we

interviewed. In deciding how to explore the politics which women held in their earlier lives, or hold now, we made the decision that we would not specifically question women on their stances on particular political positions such as socialism, communism, Zionism and Thatcherism. However, some women did see their political commitments as key elements in their life stories. (pp. 13–14)

The introduction is particularly bland on the role of Zionism, which is wielded as today's necessary credential for the right to speak 'as a Jew'. They attempt to evade the inevitable controversy by saying: 'In this collection of life stories, it does not appear to have played a particularly significant part' (p.14). But the dominant ideology within the Jewish community (and accepted outside it) claims that Zionism is central to Jewish identity and Jewish life. The failure to explore such a major contradiction undermines the book's attempt to subvert the stereotypes of Jewish women. Describing people's real lives is a necessary first step. The next step is to break out of the ideological vice which forces us to shut up or get out.

Note

Julia Bard is a freelance journalist. She is National Secretary of the Jewish Socialists' Group and a member of the editorial committee of *Jewish Socialist* magazine. She is writing a book on step-parenting.

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