

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT IN IMMIGRANT NOVELS: THE JEWISH CONFLICT IN ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S BREAD GIVERS AND HERMAN WOUK'S MARJORIE MORNINGSTAR

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The two novels of this paper, Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*, represent sequent generations in American Jewish immigrant literature. Anzia Yezierska was born in Russian Poland in about 1885 and came to America in 1890. *Bread Givers* (1925) is partly an autobiographical novel, the story of an American Jewish immigrant girl in conflict with her traditional role as the servile daughter of a demanding father and the growing impact of American society. It is the eternal Jewish conflict between adjustment as the first step toward total assimilation and loss of identity and the new modes of life imposed by changing social and ethical values.

Herman Wouk's (born in New York 1915) *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955) treats basically the same theme, the clash between tradition and transition, although from the point of view of second generation immigrants. The basic fears of assimilation and loss of identity in the Jewish sense are still there.

Both novels also focus on the role of women and particularly the changing role of Jewish women.

Bread Givers is the story of a Jewish immigrant family in the Lower East Side of New York in the early years of this century. Reb Smolinsky is a Talmudic scholar with a wife and three daughters. In the old world he would have married off his three daughters as soon as they were old enough and continued with his seclusion from the material world. His wife would have supported him by keeping a small shop or working outside the home. Such was the pattern for Talmudic scholars in Eastern Europe.

In the new world such behaviour is considered impossible. Wives are not supposed to

work and arranged marriages are no longer normative. "Lernen", studying Jewish scriptures, the most honourable of all Jewish occupations, is in the new world only an excuse for idleness.

Only one of the daughters escapes her father's tyranny, the bravest and the most independent of them, Sara, who becomes a teacher and abandons her home for many years. In the end she returns to her father's house and a soothing compromise is found. Her father is not left alone in his old age, Sara's semi-assimilated husband becomes a student of Judaism in his sparetime, and Sara's father is able to maintain his dignity in his daughter's home. It is a compromise between the old and the new world, between traditional Jewish values and the norms of modern society.

In *Tzeenah U-Reenah*, the most common prayer book and book of moral codes for women in Yiddish until our times, first published in 1622, the Commandment of honouring one's parents is explained as follows: "And as man is bidden to acknowledge God, the first Father of mankind, so should one acknowledge one's father and mother and not deny them: and, as it is forbidden to swear falsely in the name of God, so it is forbidden to swear falsely in the name of one's father or mother. One should not honour one's father and mother for the sake of what one may inherit from them; in the same way, one should not serve God for the sake of reward. One is also bound to assist one's father and mother with one's money and provide them with food, shelter and clothing, as one is bound to honour God with one's money and give alms and tithes."¹

This is the essence of the Jewish conflict in *Bread Givers*. It is a question of range: How far

1 Norman C. Core ed.: *Tzeenah U'Reenah - A Jewish Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, Vantage Press, New York-Washington-Hollywood 1965, p. 132.

can an egoistic parent carry forth the obligation concerning parents? When Reb Smolinsky after many years of separation again sees his daughter Sara who by now has become a teacher he utters: "She's only good to the world, not to her father. Will she hand me her wages from school as a dutiful daughter should?" (248) And when Sara's mother dies, he hurries to marry a widow so as to be able to continue with his way of life. In his world the female sex is there to serve him who serves his God.

But there are double standards for men and women in the new world too. Women are still subjugated even if the pattern is different. There are glimpses of this in *Bread Givers*, although it is not a major theme in the novel.

The rebellion of Sara against her father's selfish tyranny - deeply qualified by her awe at this power to kindle in others a reflection of his own devotion to Torah - leads her first to abandon her family and reject her traditional role, then to displace her frustrated love of family and tradition into the immigrant poor, and finally to embrace her father and validate, in part, the tradition he represents. These are persistent features in women's changing relations to tradition. In *Bread Givers* the compromise is not seen as defeat but as a solution, even if it seems idealised and a less realistic outcome of the deep conflict between father and daughter. It is typical of Yeziarska's profound Jewish roots that the prodigal daughter is the one who takes care of her father in the end, the strongest who is the weakest and simultaneously nearest to the struggling Jew, an image in Judaism that goes back to Biblical figures, the forebears of the Jewish people.

In Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* the social scene has changed. The book opens with Jewish New York such as it was in the 1930s when the older generation had lived in the country for several decades and the younger generation was born in America.

Irving Howe in *World of Our Fathers* already in the Preface of his book points out the two main groups of Jewish immigrants in the United States, the Sephardic group which had arrived much earlier and the enormous influx of

the Eastern European Jews who arrived from the 1880s onward. He also mentions a third Jewish group, the German Jews, but they formed a separate group whose conditions and status was higher than those of the Eastern European Jews. He describes at some length and detail the poor living conditions of the new immigrants and also the social climb of the Eastern European Jews and its consequences. It is obvious that not only was there tension between "real" Americans and newcomers, there was also tension between different Jewish groups. Poverty was the uniting force, but social differences were also the main cause of conflict².

We have seen in Anzia Yeziarska's case how some of these new immigrants desperately clung to their own way of life, but in *Marjorie Morningstar* we see another typical behavioural pattern of the new immigrants, social climbing and adoption of new values, the values of America, that it inevitably implies.

The Jewish settlers in New York underwent this change. From Ellis Island they spread mostly to the Lower East Side and slowly made their way to Bronx, Brooklyn and finally to Central Manhattan. Simultaneously with social ascent they adopted middle class behavioural patterns and values. Whereas women had been active in the old country both as homemakers, educationists and breadwinners, they were not supposed to work outside the home in the new country. This of course was not a maintainable norm in the large Jewish proletariat, but it was the ideal in the bourgeoisie³.

In *Marjorie Morningstar* the Jewish conflict is more focused on social climbing and its consequences than in *Bread Givers*. *Marjorie Morningstar* reflects the dream of the newcomers as partly implemented by the settlers who had lived in the country for decades. In *Marjorie Morningstar* Marjorie's parents had settled in America in their youth. Marjorie's father had slowly worked himself up in the feather import business and has when the novel opens established himself as a fairly successful businessman. So successful, in fact, that the family had recently moved "up" from the Bronx to Central

2 *Irving Howe: World of Our Fathers*, Bantam abridged edition, New York 1980, Preface and pp. 543-.

3 See *Charlotte Baum - Paula Hyman - Sonya Michel: The Jewish Women in America*, Plume Books, New York and Scarborough, Ont. 1977, pp. 91-; *Sarah Shulman: When We Were Young, A Walking Tour Through Radical Jewish Women's History on the Lower East Side 1879-1919* in *Melanie Kay/Kantorowitz and Irena Klepfisz (ed.): The Tribe of Dina - A Jewish Woman's Anthology*, Sinister Wisdom 29/30 1986, Montpelier VT, pp. 232-; *Sidney Stahl Weinberg: The World of Our Mothers - The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London 1988, pp. 103-.

Park West which in the 1930s was the "right" area to live. Marjorie Morningstar or Morgens-tern (Morningstar is an alias) lives in a house called Eldorado, the habitat of well-to-do upper middle class Jews. Marjorie is a student at Hunter College and has a brother Seth who is approaching his Bar Mitzwah. The external setting is thus perfect for the events to come.

The Jewish conflict is brought up with Marjorie's boy friend, the son of a rich, assimilated Jew. In a remarkable scene, a Seder table on Jewish Passover, the values are weighed against each other and the new yields to the old, the successful, assimilated Jew becomes a Jew who enjoys the community of other Jews.

A Hebrew word for community is *Tzibur* and the letters that form that word can be interpreted as follows: The first letter *tzaddi* stands for a word that means righteous, the second letter *bet* for a word that means middle and the last letter *resh* for a word that means head. The Jewish community thus consists of the righteous, those in the middle and the heads. The Seder table and another scene from Seth's Bar Mitzwah show the realistic basis for this symbolism. The classical Jewish types, uncle Samson-Aron and other less successful relatives are contrasted against the smug modernism of the successful. This also reflects the ancient pluralistic spirit of Judaism. In a Jewish community there is room for everybody according to his character. It is not the commonality of many other social groups which calls for total identification and identity that rules a Jewish community, but a spirit that reaches far beyond average emotions and intellectual notions.

Marjorie's affection towards another assimilated Jew, the musical writer Noel, is another token of the Jewish conflict. It is Noel who persuades Marjorie to eat lobster (shellfish is prohibited according to Jewish laws of *kashrut*), and it is Noel who becomes her first lover, but it is not Noel she marries nor is it Noel's children that she will bear in spite of what she thinks when she compares her future husband and Noel: "Schwartz was dark, almost moonfaced, of middle height, and broadshouldered. Marjorie had decided long ago that if ever she fell in love again it would have to be with a tall lean blond man; Noel had made that figure the type of masculinity for her." (455)

She marries the Jewish middle class lawyer Milton Schwartz and becomes an ordinary suburban Jewish housewife, the perfect Shir-

ley, the Jewish variant of the American dream, as Wouk calls her type. And ominously she is active in the Jewish community and keeps a kosher household.

In *Marjorie Morningstar* the new way of life is balanced against the ancient tribalism of the Jews, the *shtetl* mentality triumphs over the modern concept of life. It is not with the conservative movement the basic concept of which is Judaism as a dynamic religion, much more congenial according to American norms, but with the orthodox Jewish concept of rigid Judaism that Marjorie Morgens-tern settles. Nor is it with the reform Jewish movement so attractive to upper middle class Jews that Marjorie Schwartz née Morgens-tern suffices. It is all or nothing, there is no middle way for her.

But Herman Wouk also focuses on the frustration of middle class Jewish women, their resignation and passivity. Marsha Zelenko, Marjorie's best friend, who represents the semi-intellectual, bohemian Jewish type, is brought forth in the last chapters as an example of the metamorphosis from talent to success that never came. Maybe Marjorie and Marsha would never have succeeded in their careers, but they resigned too easily to the commonplace, the self-evident.

On the other hand, the symbols of change, of dynamic Judaism, Noel and Wally, important men in Marjorie's youth, did not succeed either. Noel became a good for nothing, Wally succeeded in the show business but made a mess of his private life. The outcome of this tangle is well expressed in an old Italian proverb: *Chi fà Non sà Chi sà non fà Chi vuò Non può Chi può Non vuò È così il mondo mal và.* He who acts understands not, he who understands acts not. He who wants cannot, he who cannot wants not and thus the whole world functions badly.

Compared to *Bread Givers* Marjorie Morningstar is seen from the outside, it is a man's view on women and particularly middle class Jewish women, whereas *Bread Givers* is seen from the woman's perspective, with an inside view.

Striking in both novels is the demonstration of how relationships within the family both express and determine an individual's self-acceptance and orientation as a Jew. The complexity, persistence and emotional subtlety of these relationships illuminate the expressive power of family life as the basis of *Tzibur*, community. Unresolved family conflicts are a

symbol of the individual's quarrels with God and religious tradition. And in Judaism the family is the nucleus of the tribe. To give up on one's family is the first step toward assimilation and consequently self-destruction.

There is no absolute solution to the Jewish conflict, not even self-annihilation by way of assimilation. In both *Bread Givers* and *Marjorie Morningstar* a partial solution is offered as a kind of compromise. To find a way of life which will satisfy both the Jewish yearning for Tzibur and the superficially easier non-Jewish way of life, the gentile system according to gentile rules and norms, is the basis of Jewish existence in the diaspora, any diaspora, even America to the creation and development of which the Jews have so organically contributed.

The question of a more final solution, Israel, is not brought up in either *Bread Givers* or

Marjorie Morningstar, for the simple reason that in 1925 the Jewish state was a dream and in 1955 it was still too new for established New York Jews to be considered a norm, or even a serious alternative.

Aliyah is the Hebrew word for ascent, meaning settling in Israel, yeridah the opposite, moving from Israel or descent. There is no conclusion of whether Marjorie Morgenstern's change to Mrs Milton Schwartz of New York Jewish suburbia is aliyah or yeridah, or if Sara Smolinsky's acceptance of her father's ancient Jewish norms is either of these concepts. Aliyah or yeridah, ascent or descent, forward or backward, is the eternal Jewish problem which culminates in one urge surpassing all others: To survive as a Jew.