TO OUR READERS...

In 1986, the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) published a delightful "Tribute Volume" to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of Jacob Rader Marcus's birth. The booklet's editors invited dozens of Marcus's friends, colleagues, and disciples to write a 150-word response to the question: "What was the most memorable lesson I learned from Jacob Rader Marcus?" Dr. Naomi W. Cohen, then a professor of history at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, was one of the many eminent scholars who happily contributed to this distinctive compilation of "Marcusian" lore. Cohen's entry reads as follows:

> As a young graduate student I visited the American Jewish Archives some thirty-five years ago. There I met Jacob Marcus for the first time. I shall never forget his warm welcome, his gracious hospitality, and his keen interest in my research. He went out of his way to put necessary materials at my disposal. By his behavior, he taught me that a teacher's encouragement of students consists of treating their work with the same enthusiasm and seriousness that he brings to his own.[1]

The story behind this special tribute edition of *The American Jewish Archives Journal* (*The AJAJ*) authenticates the veracity of Cohen's testimonial to Marcus on his ninetieth birthday. Indeed, it was her own students and disciples who first urged the editors of this journal to develop a thematic issue wherein Cohen's important contributions to the field of American Jewish history could be appropriately highlighted. The achievements of which her colleagues spoke transcended her well-deserved reputation as a meticulous and productive scholar. In fact, the primary impetus for honoring Cohen's work came upon the recommendation of those whom she has generously mentored over the decades. For all those who contributed to this special issue, Cohen has consistently been a teacher who treated their work with the same enthusiasm and seriousness that she brought to her own.

The proposal that *The AJAJ* honor Cohen took hold immediately. As a pioneering scholar of the American Jewish experience, Cohen's frequently cited volumes are considered by most colleagues to be essential reading. It is also important to note that, for more than a half century, Cohen has been a loyal friend and enthusiastic patron of the American Jewish Archives (AJA). Over the decades, she has commended the AJA's holdings to researchers and doctoral students. She remains one of the AJA's most loyal boosters and generous benefactors. For all of these reasons, it seemed quite fitting to have the AJA's journal fête Naomi Cohen.

One of Cohen's colleagues at Hunter College, Dr. Robert M. Seltzer—himself a graduate of HUC-JIR and a member of The Marcus Center's Academic

Advisory and Editorial Board—conceptualized this volume and, to a large extent, served as its executive editor. It was Seltzer who identified and invited the distinguished contributors to participate in this special publication. We are also indebted to *The AJAJ*'s capable managing editor, Dr. Dana Herman, who worked diligently with Seltzer to ensure that this tribute volume appeared in a timely fashion. Our readers will enjoy reading the fruits of their collaborative labors.

Stephan F. Brumberg, a distinguished historian of Jewish education in the United States, honors his colleague with an essay that traces the evolution of Jewish education in New York City during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. Prior to the Civil War, Jewish immigrants had abandoned their interest in parochial schools in favor of public school education, despite the school system's Protestant influence. Many Catholic immigrants, on the other hand, preferred parochial education. Brumberg explains why "different faith communities react[ed] differently to the changing education sector of New York City."[2]

Genealogists and students of the German Jewish experience in America will benefit from reading Kenneth Libo's article on the Obermayer family. As Libo points out, the Obermayers were never full-fledged members of the vaunted German Jewish aristocracy about which much has been written. Instead, the history of the Obermayer family offers us a case study on how German Jewish immigrants who were "not quite 'Our Crowd'… evolved in America."[3]

Two of our contributors, Robert M. Seltzer and Shuly Rubin Schwartz, unlock valuable historical information that is frequently found in the much underutilized treasure trove of Hebrew primary source materials. It is important to note that Seltzer cleverly manages to pay tribute simultaneously to Jacob Marcus and Naomi Cohen by retrieving, revising, and publishing an article he wrote fifty years ago as a term paper for Marcus's course on American Jewish history at HUC-JIR. Seltzer examines articles on life in America that appeared in the Hebrew journal, *Ha-Zefirah*, published in Warsaw. Focusing his study on the years leading up to the onset of the mass migration of Russian Jews to America, Seltzer identifies a growing spirit of disillusionment among the journal's contributors—members of the Jewish intelligentsia whose hope for a new social order for Russian Jews began to fade after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

Schwartz explores the Americanization struggles of a Hebraist and Russian *maskil* named Aron Shimon Shpall, the author's great-grandfather. Translating and explicating several of Shpall's Hebrew correspondence—letters that have remained in her family's possession for many years—Schwartz sheds new light on the career of this interesting devotee of Hebrew culture, who doggedly struggled to preserve Jewish life and maintain Hebrew literacy despite the debilitating counter-effects of American culture.

Alice Nakhimovsky and Roberta Newman contribute a fascinating comparative study on three American *brivnshtelers*—manuals that contained templates of Yiddish letters. These template manuals were used by Yiddish writers who struggled to compose "letters of all types—courtship, business, social, and family." In contrast to the *brivnshtelers* written in Europe, American *brivnshtelers* addressed themselves to the needs and concerns of the eastern European Jewish immigrant generation. As Newman and Nakhimovsky demonstrate, these American *brivnshtelers* illuminate "the diverse attitudes, ideologies, and experiences of the American Jewish immigrant community at the turn of the twentieth century."[4]

Jeffrey S. Gurock, one of the leading historians of Orthodoxy in America, provides readers with a probing analysis of Jewish ethnicity in New York City during the interwar period. Gurock emphasizes that, during this particular period, the Jews of New York overwhelmingly lived on top of one another, "bumping into each other incessantly." Having examined numerous autobiographies and oral histories relating to this era, Gurock notes that those who grew up in one of New York's Jewish neighborhoods "felt that their entire world was well-nigh Jewish."[5] Gurock goes on to explore the numerous paths that these New York Jews pursued once they were old enough to strike out on their own. Some fled this massive Jewish cauldron and passionately embraced the nation's general culture; others were determined to preserve their distinctively Jewish enclaves. Despite attrition, these Orthodox communities endured and, ultimately, found reinforcements among the immigrants who arrived during and after World War II.

Evaluating American Jewry's response to the impending destruction of European Jewry during the 1930s and, subsequently, to the onset of the Holocaust itself has engendered one of the most contentious historiographical debates in all of American Jewish history. Did American Jews do all they could to save their European coreligionists? Historians have produced contending responses to this question. Steven Bayme contributes an insightful and thoroughgoing analysis of this historiographical controversy. He begins by noting that Naomi Cohen, in her volume on the history of the American Jewish Committee (AJC)—*Not Free to Desist*—argued that AJC's leadership took the threat of Nazism seriously.[6] According to Cohen, these communal leaders did their best under the circumstances. Since these leaders were "children of the Enlightenment," their intellectual underpinnings disallowed them from fully comprehending the dimensions of the evil they faced.[7] Bayme's lucid overview provides readers with an extremely useful analysis of the various positions that historians have taken in their efforts to evaluate American Jewry's performance during that tragic era. As for Cohen's contention that American Jewish leaders did their best, Bayme concludes that her analysis still merits serious scholarly

consideration because it was based on a historical reconstruction that was contextualized, comprehensive, and fair-minded.

The honoree's own contribution to this issue illustrates how these very same scholarly principles continue to inform her methodology. Cohen's essay on William Williams (1862–1947), the commissioner of immigration at Ellis Island from 1902 to 1905 and 1909 to 1913, constitutes a new interpretive analysis of American Jewry's negative estimation of this controversial bureaucrat's work. Williams's public assertions and his official policies frequently put him at bitter odds with American Jewry. Cohen confirms that his racist opinions and unabashed aversion to the masses of immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe have led many to insist he was an antisemite. In the final analysis, however, Cohen insists that Williams "was not an antisemite." Like most of those in the American uppercrust of the Progressive era, Williams had prejudices and biases. Yet, as Cohen reminds us, these predispositions were hardly atypical. Williams was no different from men like Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft—the U.S. presidents who appointed him—in that he possessed the opinions and aversions of an American "patrician," but nevertheless "personal tastes did not interfere with their political and professional associations."[8]

The scholarly contributions in this tribute volume enhance our knowledge of the American Jewish past, and this fact alone is a fitting tribute to the career of our venerable honoree. Considered as a totality, the essays in this volume constitute a scholarly bouquet that is presented as a token of our affectionate gratitude for the tireless efforts of a dedicated teacher and beloved mentor.

During the course of a newspaper interview that was given in anticipation of his eighty-fifth birthday, Simon Wolf—a prominent lawyer and Jewish communal leader—shared his philosophy on life:

> I'm opposed to flowers for the dead. I'm opposed to all expensive funerals. Some people bankrupt themselves for it. I'd rather have a stick of taffy while I'm living than a column of epitaffy when I'm dead.[9]

All of us at The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives are pleased to present Naomi W. Cohen with a well-deserved "stick of taffy."

G.P.Z.
Cincinnati, Ohio

Notes

[1]Abraham J. Peck and Jonathan D. Sarna, *Biz Hundert un Tsvantsik! A Tribute Volume for Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus on the Occasion of his 90th Birthday* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1986), 9.

[2]Stephan F. Brumberg, "The Education of Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic Children in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York City," 13.

[3]Kenneth Libo, "Not Quite 'Our Crowd,'" 44.

[4]Alice Nakhimovsky and Roberta Newman, "'Free America,'" 74.

[5]Jeffrey S. Gurock, "The Depth of Ethnicity," 146.

[6]Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1972).

[7]Steven Bayme, "American Jewish Leadership Confronts the Holocaust," 163.

[8]Naomi W. Cohen, "Commissioner Williams and the Jews," 121.

[9]"Simon Wolf at 84 Years; Lawyer, Philantropists [*sic*], Public Man and Friend of Many Presidents of the United States," *The New York Times* (23 October 1921): 85.