

*The following piece was written by my grandfather, Ernest Norman Marks, apparently on board a Matson Line ship, probably in the Pacific while returning to Australia from a visit to the U.S.A. in 1940, where I surmise he bought the book in question. I found it handwritten on Matson Line notepaper and clipped inside the copy of the book my father inherited after Ernest Marks' death in 1971. The book is held at our Sorrento house.*

*It is relevant to reflect on the date, 1940: before Pearl Harbor, but after the onset of war with Germany in Europe. The Nazis had been in power since 1933, and it was after Kristallnacht: the Nazis' views on Jews were by now well known. But it was before the Wannsee conference in Berlin, and before the Endlösung had been articulated among the Nazis.*

*Would the organized mass extermination of the Final Solution have been unimaginable to Ernest Marks? Almost certainly. Even Jews in Europe apparently thought that the massacres and deaths in the Ukraine and elsewhere were just the recrudescence of the mob violence of the pogroms Jews had suffered from for decades and centuries before, not the harbingers of state-sponsored extermination of the Jews and others.*

*It was really only after the war, with the liberation of the death camps, that the full horror of the Nazis' actions became widely known. At any rate, throughout this piece, Ernest Marks and Cecil Roth evidently know something of what is happening in Germany and occupied Europe, and the plight of the Jews in Germany. — R. E. M., July 2013*

## MATSON LINE

1940

*The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* by Cecil Roth, published only this year should be of the greatest interest to all Jews and is most notable for the concise and compact manner in which the author has ranged the centuries.

In a foreword, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the eminent New York minister of the Rockefeller Baptist Church, highly praises the book and particularly the author's historical and scrupulous attempt to be "fair, accurate, balanced, and careful." The writer of the foreword also quotes H. G. Wells' statement that

"I am convinced myself that there is no more evil thing in this present world than race prejudice, none at all. I write deliberately — it is the worst single thing in life now. It justifies and holds together more baseness, cruelty and abomination than any other sort of error in the world"

and goes on to say, "Events in Europe have terribly validated this judgment, and in America the repercussions of foreign anti-Semitism are too frequent and menacing to be neglected."

In his own preface, the author states,

“The outcome of my enquiry has been more than a little surprising, even to myself. There is no branch of human culture or civilization which Jews have not touched and enriched.”

The opening chapter deals with “the Hebraic Heritage” and the author uses the historical dividing line of Israelites and Jews — the latter to denote the post-Biblical period with which his work more particularly deals. The short summary of the first chapter is again remarkable for the compact and succinct manner in which so much ground is traversed and is built on his statement that “The basis of the Hebraic contribution to Western civilization and the Hebrew’s greatest gift to humanity is the ideal of the One God, Creator of Heaven and earth.” (p.4)

“It was not without reason,” writes the author that the first seal of the U.S. Republic depicts the overthrow of Pharaoh in the Red Sea with the motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” (p.15) and again,

“It was Luther’s translation of the Bible into High German which rendered that particular dialect supreme and first demonstrated the force and malleability of the German language. It hence marks the beginning of modern German literature. The greatest German orator of today, when he holds thousands of hearers spellbound by his command of language, apparently does not realize that he is making use of an instrument which became what it is today only through the force of the Hebraic scriptures.” (p.16)

and he finishes his first chapter on The Hebraic Heritage by saying,

“Deprive modern Europe and America of the Hebraic heritage, and the result would be barely recognizable. It would be a different, and it would be a poorer thing. In Woodrow Wilson’s expressive words, ‘if we could but have the eyes to see the subtle elements of thought which constitute the gross substance of our present habit, both as regards the sphere of private life and as regards the action of the state, we could easily discover how very much besides religion we owe to the Jew’.” (p.21)

The second chapter which the author entitles “The Process of Degradation” deals with the earliest known records of Jews with and in Europe and after telling how a Jewish community flourished in Cologne in the year 321 and how Constantine the Great issued an edict curtailing their privileges he proceeds by saying,

“It was 150 years after this that the Germans first permanently crossed the Rhine and established themselves in the Roman province. The aliens today, therefore, are not the Jews, the only representatives perhaps in the Rhineland of its inhabitants of sixteen centuries ago” (p.23)

and ends this section that,

“The history of the Jews in the Western World, during the last 150 years, is the record of their gradual recovery and their return to a more or less

balanced existence, socially and economically — a process which began with prodigious rapidity but which, before it could be fully accomplished, was reversed in that country where it had achieved its most remarkable progress.” (p.24)

The author then proceeds to trace the history of the Jews in Europe during the “process of degradation” and deals very briefly but clearly step by step in explaining the birth and growth of the essentially Jewish trades and activities and exploding many myths. For instance, “In remote times, the Jew had shown no proclivity towards finance. Rather, the reverse.”(p.28) and he pithily explains the advent of the Jews to the business of money-lending and also to that of peddler and old rags man and reminds us that even in England it was not until 1831 that Jews were permitted to open shops for retail trade. Yet, as he says, the English policies [vis-a-vis the Jews] were particularly liberal in comparison with those which prevailed on the Continent. Then follows a carefully compiled account of the insults, degradations, and inequities the Jews were made to suffer at different times and in various communities throughout Europe:

“In Frankfurt no less than thirty-eight different imposts were levied upon the Jews, mostly additional to those imposed on the ordinary townsfolk.” (p.35)

“In the streets, sometimes in the Ghetto, too, the Jew had to be distinguished by an ugly badge of shame, a yellow circle worn on the outer garment above the heart in Germany, a yellow or crimson hat or kerchief in Italy. The number of weddings was restricted in Germany at least, and only one member of each family was permitted to set up his own household. The remainder were compelled either to emigrate or to remain unmarried; yet, at the same time, association with non-Jewish women was punished by the most drastic penalties, including death.” (pp.37/38)

Mr Roth gives further details of restrictions and tells us that some were so burdensome and multifarious that “Evasion was necessary if he was to exist” — thus for instance “tears were made in deliberately in men’s clothing to make them technically second-hand” etc etc.

He then deals with the Jewish attributes of family life — cleanliness — learning and points out how these many attributes were the cause of survival.

Mr Roth’s Age of Degradation he tells us lasted up to the time of the French Revolution “which broke down the gates of the Ghetto and permitted its downtrodden inhabitants to enjoy for the first time the same rights and opportunities as their neighbors.” (p.46) The consequences were remarkable he states and asserts,

“the Jew of the Ghetto period was not a usurer, a petty trader and so on, by choice. His intellectual interests were at least as wide and varied as those of

the patrician or citizen of the outside world. It was not, therefore, that his descendents rose above their level; it was that after a lapse of centuries they at last found their level.” (p.47)

The next chapter the author titles the Revival of Learning or the beginning of the intellectual history which he states began with the Renaissance and he deals of course in this chapter with the Jewish connection therewith, according to the author,

“The part played by the Jews in this process was of the utmost importance. It may be said, indeed, that it could not have come about as it did but for their assistance; and that without them, the revival of the fifteenth century would have been retarded or assumed a different form.” (pp.52/3)

Then follows carefully collected facts to substantiate the statement this section concludes by, “This evidence confirms and illustrates in a remarkable fashion the fact that the Jewish share in the early revival of learning was of the utmost significance.” (p.63).

Then follows an account of Jews and their participation in the “great Voyages of Discovery” and the author by fact and inference leads up to the following very definite and forthright statement: “All the more important astronomical tables of the Middle Ages, without exception, were at least translated or compiled with the help of Jews; in the most important cases they were entirely of Jewish authorship.” (p.81) He lays particular stress on the importance of Jewish savants with the science of cartography and instances the Crescas (of Majorca) family in particular and tells us that, “It is significant that the anti-Jewish persecutions marked the end of the glories of the Majorcan school of Cartography.” (p.86)

Details of Jewish participation in world discoveries follow and an interesting sentence reads, “When Germany was an outpost of barbarism, and all the culture of Europe was concentrated in Moslem Spain, an enterprising Jew, Abraham ibn Jacob, was among the mission which the Caliph of Cordova sent to the northern country, and he brought back with him one of the most informative accounts now extant.” (p.97) A reference to Sven Hadin, the great Swedish explorer, tells us that he (Hadin) is at it happens a descendant of Aaron Isak, the founder of the Jewish community in Sweden and this chapter ends with:

“The same spirit which forced Jews towards new spheres of economic activity urged them to act as pioneers of European enquiry in unexplored regions of the world. Even the Ghetto was unable to quench that spirit of adventure which is to be found in all men alike.” (p.102)

Mr Roth next deals with “the Jew in Letters” and an early sentence of which the earlier context may be necessary says, “What the educated Italian or Frenchman of a generation ago considered peculiarities of Jewish speech are thus in many cases relics of an earlier age, before modern Italian or French was dreamed of, but when

the Jews were already familiar figures throughout the Latin world.” (p.104)

The great influence of the Hebrew languages on the subsequent literature and development of the arts of letters is traversed and particular mention is made of the participation of the Jews in the literary life of Spain which had such an important effect on European literature as a whole.

Dealing specifically with England, Mr Roth refers to “that astonishing renaissance of letters under the Tudors when Jews were virtually absent from the country,” yet he points out how English literature of that “glorious period was profoundly imbued with the influence of individual Jews or persons of Jewish blood.” (p.114) Considerable reference is made to Shakespeare, with the author speaking of Professor Friedrich Gundolf, “If the sages of Heidelberg are today able to claim Shakespeare as a kindred Nordic spirit, it is partly because he found in Germany so gifted a ‘Semitic’ interpreter.” (p.125)

An interesting reference is to that of Daniel Sanders, a famous German Jewish lexicographer, and the author’s remarks that “Logic should force present-day purists to believe that the tongue formed as a literary vehicle by Luther’s Bible translation, made malleable by Mendelssohn, human by Heine, and purified with the aid of Sanders, is no longer a proper vehicle for expressing the thoughts of ‘Nordic’ man” (pp. 134,5) is an interesting commentary on what has so recently happened.

A short chapter on the Jews in Journalism is followed by a chapter on Art, Music, and the Stage. Again, the wealth of facts and names has been compactly compiled but so cleverly treated that this section also holds our interest completely. Referring to the democratization of the stage, he refers to the Russian Isaac Levitan of whom the anti-Semitic *Novoye Vremya* wrote, “This full-blooded Jew knew, as no other man, how to make us realize and love our plain and homely country scenes.” (p.153)

Music, of course, is treated liberally and, commenting on Jews as patrons of music, he quotes Richard Strauss as having remarked, “How can I be anti-Semitic when I know that without our Jewish friends all our opera-houses and concert-halls would be more than half empty?” (p.169) The stage also as one of the vehicles used by Jews in their Contribution to Civilization is by no means neglected nor is the motion picture industry and, although some Jews were associated with the lowering of the standard of morals in the early post-war period in this art, Mr Roth shows that in the wider perspective Jews have contributed largely to the elevation of this industry to a modern art and particularly refers to the late Irving Thalberg.

Next comes “the Jew in European Thought” and Mr Roth tells us that “Hebraic theism gave Europe its vision of supreme reality and is thus at the base of the European intellectual outlook.” (p.181) From Philo and Maimonides “whose work

is woven into the texture of Christian theology” the author deals with men up to and subsequent to Spinoza and then turns to the Jew in “Scientific Progress” and asserts that a Jew is responsible for the transmission of Hindu numerals from India to the Arabic-speaking world and subsequently from the Islamic world to the Christian.

Through the Middle Ages on to the well-known results of the Nobel Prize winners who comprised 9% of Jews or 12% if half-Jews are included — a very high percentage by comparison with the 1 to 2% of the Jewish population. The dye industry, Haber of nitrogen from air fame, David Schwartz the originator of Zeppelins, Siegfried Marcus first inventor of the automobile, Heinrich Hertz of Hertzian wave theory, and Philip Reis first inventor of the telephone to whom a monument was erected in 1878 and many others make very interesting and a most informative reading.

Medicine, of course, has a chapter to itself and dealing with the earlier records, Roth says, “Were the list complete, it is doubtful whether many eminent Portuguese or Spanish physicians of the period would not be included.” (p.230) The author refers to the number of Jewish physicians in Italy in 1895 and Germany in 1932, the latter figures being given as 8000 out of 52,000. Mr Roth then says,

“For some incomprehensible reason, this is regarded as a ‘problem.’ But every person is at liberty to choose his own physician, as he is to choose his own lawyer, and if in these callings the number of Jews is particularly large, it can prove nothing other than their ability, devotion, and the manner in which these qualities are recognized by their their clients.” (p.249)

The Jew in the Economic Sphere is the next subject and an interesting reference is to coffee as having been generally termed “the Jews’ Drink” and as having a bearing on the contention that coffee was first introduced to England by Levantine Jews. The Jewish interest in tobacco is traced from the earliest days of the weed’s discovery and the author states, “The Jewish interest in the tobacco industry, therefore, is not a recent development: Jews have been interested in it from the first.” (p.259)

Vanilla, chocolate, the diamond industry are referred to in connection with the book title and then to finance, in which realm, “Jews have transformed economic life in commercializing it by being the first to create credit instruments and introduce the custom of buying and selling securities which supplied mobile capital for industrial undertakings.” (p.264) The author deals with the canard of Jewish wealth and tells us that in the Ghetto age, “Actually, one-third of the Jews were dependent on charity and as many more lived on the verge of the minimum subsistence-level.” (p.265)

He also again explodes the myth of international Jewish finance, and in referring to

the changes brought about in the last few decades which he terms the “great peaceful revolution” that is the leveling of the barriers between classes and masses he states, “In helping to bring to bring this about, rather than in a fictitious financial predominance, lies the real importance of the role of the Jew in modern economic life, and one of his most significant contributions to civilization in recent times.” (p.291)

The Jew in Agriculture and Public Life and in Western Law are the penultimate chapters and the author entitles his last chapter “The Greatest of These is Charity”. In this chapter he refers to Lewis Gompertz as the founder and originator of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and this story is most illuminating.

The many benefactions of Jews to their own and other charitable bodies and undertakings makes interesting and in some cases sorry reading in the light of what has happened to some of the benefactors and their benefactions.

The Epilogue makes clear that there should be no misunderstanding that Jews have fully contributed their share to European culture and human civilization but except in the early religious sphere not to any undue extent. The proportion is respectable but not abnormally large, in the realm of individual contributions of Jewish origin.

But, says the author, the Jews as a people have fully contributed their share to human progress.

“The Jew in fact,” says Roth “is heir to a double tradition. There is the religious history of three and a half millennia, which fructified above all on the soil of Palestine and with God’s help may fructify there again. And there is the political history of the past twenty centuries, which has been associated principally with the Western World, in whose civilization persons of Jewish birth have taken, not indeed a dominant, nor a disproportionate share, but a share which is worthy of study and respect.” (p.364)

Roth finally concludes the book with,

“For two thousand years, then, the Jews have formed part of Europe. Throughout that period, though more intensively during the past century, since the gates of the Ghetto were broken down, they have made their contribution to the common heritage — sometimes as intermediaries, sometimes as pioneers, more often, if their activities were not curtailed, as participants. In the long run their contribution has become interwoven inextricably with the common stock by a thousand different strands. Disintegrate these, and the tree of Western culture would be mutilated. Allow them unobstructed growth, and it may bear in the future through this means fruit yet more splendid than in the past.” {pp.367/8)

Mr Roth’s book is remarkable in that in a comparatively short book or certainly

not a long one he has so condensed the results of his evidently prodigious investigations and so tactfully interposed the necessarily long list of names and places that the reader is continuously absorbed and does not tend to skip longish passages and tabulations. On the contrary, it is difficult not to concentrate completely and occasionally to refer back and the book should certainly commend itself to all English-speaking Jews.

E. N. M.

Cecil Roth,  
*The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*,  
New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940,  
pp. xviii + 420.

Full text of this book at  
[http://archive.org/stream/jewishcontributi00roth/jewishcontributi00roth\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/jewishcontributi00roth/jewishcontributi00roth_djvu.txt)