

NOT FOR
MYSELF
ALONE

Celebrating
Jewish-American
Writers

October 21, 2001 - April 21, 2002

From the Leonard L. Milberg '53 Collection of Jewish-American Writers

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

And if I am for myself alone, what am I?

And if not now, when?

(Pirkei Avot, I, 14)

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INTRODUCTION

The Leonard L. Milberg '53 Collection of Jewish-American Writers in honor of Harold T. Shapiro was built by a committee of scholars over a two-year period, beginning in 1999. The collection consists of poetry, fiction, drama, and essays produced over almost two centuries by American writers who also happen to be Jewish. While the experience as an ethnic and religious minority often informs their writing, there is also a drive toward assimilation and secularization that makes it difficult to find one consistent definition of just who *the* Jewish-American writer is.

This assembly of books from every corner of American Jewish life presents a rich array of inexplicable relationships and wonderful inconsistencies. What makes the collection especially interesting, however, is the way in which it uncovers the story of the incursion of Jewish writers into the American mainstream around the middle of the twentieth century. The roughly chronological organization of the material selected for this display offers a unique opportunity to observe a long pattern of vacillation between the desire to fit into the American myth and a competing desire to maintain and proclaim difference. Visitors are invited to explore the exhibition and draw their own conclusions from the multiplicity of texts and images. It is hoped that they will come to appreciate the rich contribution that Jewish-American writers have made to the national culture and society.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, approximately 150,000 Jews arrived in America, many of them from German-speaking areas. Unlike the earlier Sephardic immigrants who settled in the port cities along the Atlantic, this wave of immigrants followed the general trend of the period and headed for the frontier, eventually establishing a chain of Jewish communities that stretched to the Pacific.

As they established their families and their small businesses, Jews began to join together to form congregations, community institutions, and fraternal organizations. Though newly arrived immigrants had neither the time nor the money to devote to developing literary talent, in time literary production provided a means by which the scattered Jewish communities united. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish periodicals such as the *Occident*, the *American Israelite*, and the *Jewish Messenger* published poetry and novels by American

Jews. The poetry of Penina Moise and Emma Lazarus and the fiction of Nathan Mayer and Isaac Mayer Wise projected a sense of Jewish peoplehood, as newspaper editors stressed both the adoption of American ideals and the preservation of Judaism.

The nineteenth century witnessed not only the first pieces of literary work from American Jews but also, and perhaps more important, the emergence of institutions and audiences able to foster literary production. Along with the national Jewish magazines, the founding of the Jewish Publication Society and the proliferation of local literary societies encouraged literary production. The growing number of congregations and their increasingly prominent rabbis – Isaac Leeser and Isaac Mayer Wise, among them – led to both the demand for and the promotion of Bible translations, sermon publications, and American Jewish prayer books. Jewish writers, such as Rebecca Gratz and Penina Moise, also developed textbooks and hymnbooks for the equivalent of Jewish Sunday schools and for synagogues.

THE LOWER EAST SIDE

"The Jewish East Side of New York began northeast from the tip of Manhattan, a mile and a half from the point where the immigrants landed. By the turn of the century, it extended northward from Henry Street to Tenth Street and eastward from the Bowery almost to the East River. Within these teeming blocks, some of them the most crowded in the world, 150,000 Jews lived on the threshold of American life. Every year thousands more arrived, while other thousands poured out from the great Ghetto to the colonies it had spawned in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Bronx.

"There was never, in the history of American immigration, anything quite like the old East Side. The Jewish East Side was not as colorful as the adjacent Italian Quarter around Mulberry Street, not as exotic or cohesive as San Francisco's Chinatown before the earthquake, not as prosperous as the German sections of Milwaukee and St. Louis, nor as poor and squalid as the Irish North End of Boston a half century earlier. Nevertheless, it had the qualities of each of those neighborhoods, and exhibited a spectacular energy uniquely its own. Here abilities that had been pent up for centuries within the tradition-bound villages of Eastern Europe were suddenly set free. Here the largest, most diversified, and most authentic Yiddish-speaking community in America confronted trials and opportunities on a scale that only New York could present."¹

THE DAILY FORWARD

Founded in New York in 1897, *Der Forverts* (the *Daily Forward*) was, in the words of its founding editor, Abraham Cahan, "a socialist paper for the whole Yiddish-speaking people." Cahan was a passionate promoter of Yiddish culture and literature, as well as an ardent socialist who stressed the international nature of Jewish concerns. As a delegate at the 1891 Congress of the Second International, he raised "the Jewish question" and was subsequently dubbed "the apostle of the Jews" by Friedrich Engels. The *Forward's* circulation peaked at 200,000 during World War I, and for decades thereafter the daily measured the complex evolution of American Jewish identity. The issue on display adjacent to the Milberg Gallery was obtained from the Judaica Division of the New York Public Library and is dated October 21, 1901 – precisely one hundred years before the opening of this exhibition.

YIDDISH THEATER

Yiddish theater began to flourish on New York's Lower East Side in the 1890s, just as the influx of Jewish immigrants was reaching a peak. With its origins in the traditional *Purimshpiel* (a play performed on the festival of Purim) and in well-known figures from Eastern European Jewish culture such as the *badkhan* (clown) and *magid* (preacher), Yiddish theater offered new immigrants a vibrant and colorful respite from the grind of daily life. Loose adaptations of Shakespeare were billed as *fartaytsht un farbesert* (translated and improved), and American matinee idols such as Jacob Adler and Boris Tomashevksi rose to stardom. Jacob Gordin's *Jewish Queen Lear* adapted Shakespeare's plot to a Jewish milieu. Standard repertoires also included Abraham Goldfaden's operettas and the popular melodramas known as *shund*.

YIDDISH POETRY

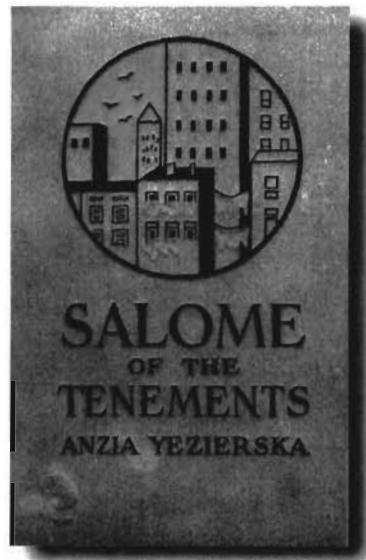
Shoemakers, house painters, and laborers by day, readers of Baudelaire, Hofmannsthal, Pushkin, Poe, and Rilke by night, American Yiddish poets wrote in a wide variety of styles, addressing the rich variety of modern Jewish life. Their poems appeared in widely circulated dailies like *Der Forverts* and in avant-garde literary journals like *Shriftn* that sustained small readerships and even smaller press runs. However, both the poets and their poems were far less isolated from



Kadia Molodowsky, *Afn Barg* (On the Mountain), NY: Yiddish Cooperative Book League, 1938.

YIDDISH FICTION

Yiddish fiction in America spans the entire gamut of genres, themes, and styles: deceptively simple Hasidic folktales; richly imagined historical dramas; romantic depictions of Eastern European shtetl life; impressionistic vignettes of the American urban experience; dark, often brutal psychological realism; nostalgic memoir. Both a mirror of new forms of life in *di goldene medine* (the golden land) and a reminder of the world left behind, Yiddish novels often appeared initially in serialized form for the mass reading audiences of daily newspapers. American Yiddish fiction's most beloved practitioner, Isaac Bashevis Singer, known simply as "Bashevis" by his public, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978.



Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements*, NY: Boni & Liveright, 1923.

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS I: ANTIN, FRANK, LEWISOHN, H. ROTH, YEZIARSKA

With the exception of Waldo Frank, who was born to a German Jewish family in New Jersey, all of these writers came to the United States in early childhood, usually in the wake of persecution in Eastern Europe. Their families flocked to the rapidly expanding ghettos in American cities, most prominently New York's Lower East Side, along with the more than two million other East European Jews who emigrated to the United States between 1880 and the mid-1920s. They wrote of the complicated, painful, and sometimes exhilarating experience of entry into a culture they regarded with ambivalence. America was both the promised land, where streets might be paved

with riches and freedom from oppression readily found, and the land of disappointment, to be cursed with the common phrase, *a klug tzu Columbus* (a pox on Columbus), a land where they encountered poverty, overcrowding, demeaning working conditions, and sometimes overwhelming challenges to their religious traditions, practices, and beliefs.

For this generation of immigrants, who wrote their novels, short stories, critical essays, and memoirs in English, Yiddish nonetheless remained enduringly important. Mary Antin, Henry Roth, and Anzia Yeziarska peppered their fiction with Yiddish – and sometimes Hebrew – words and phrases and employed an inflected English to capture the cadences and vernacular energy of Yiddish speech. Given the strangeness of the world they evoked, their successes were uncanny. Sam Goldwyn brought Yeziarska to Hollywood to write a screenplay for the silent film version of her collection of stories, *Hungry Hearts* (1920), and offered her a contract, which she turned down to return to New York. Antin's autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), was a best seller, the first ever by a Jewish author about Jewish life. Like Abraham Cahan before her, Antin tried to educate the American public about the lives of East European immigrants (she

added a glossary to her text for just this purpose). A far less ingratiating and far more sophisticated writer, Henry Roth published *Call It Sleep* in 1934 to the praise of critics and the indifference of the general reading public. This brilliant novel, a painful rendering of boyhood and coming of age through the eyes of a child, influenced by Freudian thought and modernist fiction, drew the attention of later critics like Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, and Alfred Kazin and was reprinted and given a second life in 1960.

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS II: B. HECHT, KAUFMAN, ODETS, PARKER, PERELMAN, WEST

Unlike the immigrant writers of their own generation, these American-born playwrights, novelists, humorists, and screenwriters eschewed overt representation of Jewish life. Although the Yiddish theater and vaudeville nourished the Broadway stage (and especially the musical) and European Jewish immigrants in large part created Hollywood, the Jewishness of characters and subject matter was often masked or minimized in plays, musicals, and movies of the 1930s and 1940s. Working with the Group Theatre in the wake of the Depression, Clifford Odets, one of the most celebrated American playwrights of the 1930s, focused on working-class life generally, inspired by radical politics. S. J. Perelman wrote scripts for the Marx Brothers' movies, betraying a mad comic sensibility that was implicitly though hardly ever explicitly tied to the Jewish experience, its skepticism and sense of the absurd. In 1944 Ben Hecht remarked on "the almost complete disappearance of the Jew from American fiction, stage, and movies,"² referring to the anglicized names of Jewish characters in plays and screenplays by George S. Kaufman, Hecht, and Odets. Among the sparkling wits associated with the Broadway theater, the Algonquin Round Table, and the *New Yorker* magazine, Kaufman, Dorothy Parker, Moss Hart, S. N. Behrman, and George Jean Nathan helped to create a lasting image of the urbane, worldly, and supremely articulate – though by no means overtly Jewish – metropolitan writer.



Bernard Malamud, *The Magic Barrel*. NY: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958.

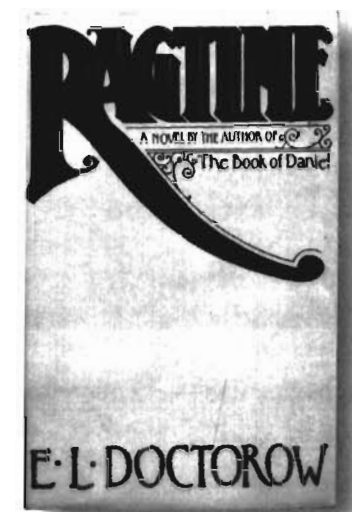
THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S OLDER GENERATION OF FICTION WRITERS

The important and influential Jewish writers and literary critics of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the popular Jewish stars of vaudeville, music hall, and burlesque of the early twentieth century, paved the way for the novelists who achieved extraordinary success and even celebrity in the years after World War II – what many consider to be the Golden Age of Jewish fiction writing in America. Between 1950 and 1960, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth all published works of fiction that received the National Book Award, and the careers of Bellow and Roth have been marked by extraordinary longevity and sustained prominence in the world of American letters. Born between the two world wars, most of

them to immigrant parents, these novelists brought Jewish characters, preoccupations, humor, and linguistic styles into the consciousness of American readers. According to the critic Irving Howe, Jewish writers brought to fiction “turnings of voice, feats of irony, and tempos of delivery that helped create a new American style, . . . a grating mixture of the sardonic and the sentimental, a mish-mash of gutter wisdom and graduate school learning.” Indeed, Howe argues the one major innovation in American fiction since the days of Hemingway and Faulkner has been “the yoking of street raciness and high cultural mandarin which we associate with American Jewish writers.”³

These writers chronicled the aftermath of World War II and the incorporation into American society of another generation of European immigrants, although they sometimes did so obliquely, without overt discussion of the horrors of the Holocaust. They also registered individual ethical dilemmas created by national traumas like McCarthyism and the Vietnam War. They mined the psychological drama of American Jewish family life, exploring oedipal rebellion against parents, sexual obsession and liberation, the creation of a new kind of Jewish masculinity,

wives’ and daughters’ rejection of the patriarchal traditions of Jewish law and life, and immigrants’ economic struggle for survival in America. Tillie Olsen’s work was inflected by feminism and communism, Grace Paley’s by peace activism and working-class struggles, Philip Roth’s by the literary gambits of postmodernism. Writers like Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and Norman Mailer bore witness to the sometimes tense relations between Jews and African Americans. Others took account of assimilation and anti-Semitism, while some, like Cynthia Ozick, returned to the subject of religion itself. Their styles and forms were varied, from the realism of Bellow, to the aura of fantasy in some of Malamud’s work, to the Catskill-inspired comedy of Roth, to E. L. Doctorow’s blend of fiction and history, and finally to Mailer’s experiments with the new journalism.



E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*. NY: Bantam Books, 1976.

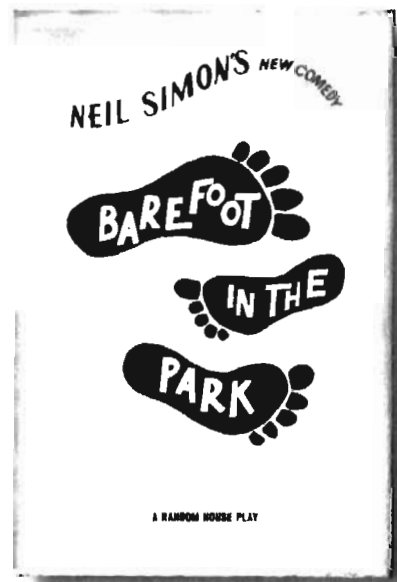
THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S YOUNGER GENERATION OF FICTION WRITERS

Several decades ago some critics, including Irving Howe, believed that the distinctive character of American Jewish fiction would eventually become attenuated, that a growing distance between contemporary writers and the experience of immigration, the languages of Europe, and the memory of persecution would deplete the resources of authorial imagination. On the contrary, the late twentieth century witnessed a revival of American Jewish writing and creativity. Born after World War II, some of them the children of refugees and survivors, many of these novelists and graphic artists have returned to the issues and episodes of earlier



Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. NY: Pantheon Books, 1986.

times – to Orthodoxy, to the Holocaust, to exile from Europe, and to the mysticism associated with writers like Isaac Bashevis Singer and Cynthia Ozick. “I have found,” writes Rebecca Goldstein, author of *The Mind-Body Problem* (1983) and *Mazel* (1996), “that my Jewish dreams, at least sometimes, take me backward in time, into a past in which the texture of Jewishness was more richly felt.”⁴ Although Judaism itself is central to the work of Max Apple, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Nathan Englander, and Allegra Goodman, a decidedly secular vision dominates the fiction of others, like Paul Auster. Those who review the past, however, do not imitate earlier writers but rather question and reinvent history, belief, social custom, and literary forms, re-creating an older Jewish world through fantasy, longing, and even whimsy.

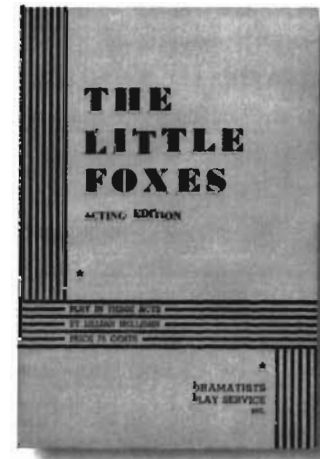


Neil Simon, *Barefoot in the Park*, NY: Random House, 1964.

Miller’s Willy Loman stands as the quintessential example of the Jewish playwright’s ability to create an American archetype out of the experience of the diaspora Jew.

THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY’S OLDER GENERATION OF THEATER/FILM WRITERS: HELLMAN, MILLER, SCHULBERG, N. SIMON

In the hands of these playwrights and screenwriters the middle-class Jew became a universal type. While their novelist peers continued to write openly about identifiable Jewish characters and situations, those writing for the stage – and then screen – appealed to what was undoubtedly a wider and more diverse audience by representing the Jew as everyman and the Jewish family as typically American. They came, for the most part, from solidly middle-class backgrounds, prosperous enough, if precariously so, to make the struggle for material success and its soul-destroying possibilities a focus of their plays. Arthur



Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes*, Acting Edition, NY: Dramatists Play Service, 1942.

Miller came out of the same artistic world that Clifford Odets helped to create: the Federal Theatre Project in Manhattan, with its strong left-wing leanings and politically conscious theater. And like Odets, Miller, as well as Lillian Hellman and Budd Schulberg, was deeply affected by McCarthyism and the havoc it wreaked on the worlds of Hollywood and the theater. All were called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s. Odets and Schulberg named names and renounced their past political involvements; Miller and Hellman refused to cooperate with the committee. Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953) represents the hysteria of anti-Communist paranoia, while Schulberg incorporated certain aspects of his own experience into the screenplay of *On the Waterfront* (1954) and Hellman wrote at length in her self-dramatizing memoirs, especially *Scoundrel Time* (1976), about her refusal to cooperate.

THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY’S YOUNGER GENERATION OF THEATER/FILM WRITERS: ALLEN, KUSHNER, MAMET, WASSERSTEIN

The Jewish-American love affair with comedy and the stage has persisted into the twenty-first century. In the plays, movies, and stories of Woody Allen – who, like Neil Simon, began his career as a comedy writer for television – we can detect the inheritance of Groucho Marx and S. J. Perelman. But contemporary playwrights and filmmakers also share the manic, neurotic sensibility of a Philip Roth and the continuing concern with ethical and social questions manifested in the works of their theatrical precursors, Miller and Hellman. In something of a backward glance to this generation, Tony Kushner makes the trauma of McCarthyism central to *Angels in America* (1993) and merges the persecution of suspected Communists in the 1950s with contemporary racism and homophobia in the era of AIDS. Indeed, gender, sexuality, and all manner of relations between

the sexes dominate the comedy and drama of these writers. While Woody Allen anatomizes the anxieties of a nervous masculinity and David Mamet examines masculine aggression and resentment, Wendy Wasserstein brings a feminist consciousness to bear on the lives and careers of women from the 1960s to the present. The return to the subject of religion, a theme of some contemporary novelists, is detectable here as well, especially in the recent work of David Mamet, but all of these writers create distinctly Jewish characters with utter casualness and an apparent lack of self-consciousness.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ESSAYISTS

The group of cultural, literary, and social critics that came to be called the New York intellectuals originally gathered around a series of journals. The first of these was the *Menorah Journal*, established in 1915, followed by the *Partisan Review* (1934), *Commentary* (1945), and *Dissent* (1953).

These journals offered young Jewish intellectuals and writers a forum for expressing their political views and literary ambitions during an era when the academic and literary establishments were, if not closed to Jews, then certainly only minimally hospitable. One of their number, Lionel Trilling, was the first Jew appointed to a permanent position in the Columbia University English Department, in 1939. Trilling wrote for the *Menorah Journal* in the 1920s, attracted by the charismatic leadership of its de facto editor, Elliot Cohen, and then moved on to *Partisan Review*, a journal that had no institutional Jewish ties but was, rather, founded by Philip Rahv and William Phillips as an organ of the pro-Communist John Reed Club. Rahv and Phillips soon broke with the John Reed Club, and the journal ultimately took on a liberal, anti-Stalinist cast. *Partisan Review* proved crucial in enabling Jewish writers and critics to enter and to shape the mainstream of American literary life.

Commentary, launched by the American Jewish Committee and edited by Elliot Cohen, extended the profound influence that Jewish intellectuals exercised on cultural and academic life through the 1960s. Norman Podhoretz, one of Lionel Trilling's protégés as a student at Columbia, took over its editorship in 1960 and oversaw its transformation from a champion of the non-Communist left to a mouthpiece for neoconservatism.

Dissent, co-founded and edited for forty years by Irving Howe, retained the democratic socialist leanings of its founders. Critics like Trilling, Alfred Kazin,

Irving Howe, and Leslie Fiedler, who were initially left-leaning, attracted to socialism, and influenced by Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, helped to create a kind of cultural criticism that merged art and politics and sought to analyze literature in the context of social and intellectual history. They were particularly influential as champions of modernism and interpreters of American literature. In a postwar era that saw a fuller integration of ethnic and religious minorities into the American scene, these critics introduced an awareness of European culture and letters into discussions of literature and literary criticism. The Kentucky-born, non-Jewish writer Elizabeth Hardwick, explaining to an interviewer in 1979 why, as a young woman, she had aspired to be a New York Jewish intellectual, identified as their defining characteristics a tradition of "intellectual skepticism; and also a certain deracination . . . and their openness to European culture . . . [and] the questioning of the arrangements of society called radicalism."⁵

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETS

At the turn of the twentieth century Jewish poets writing in America composed their works largely on the margins of mainstream American literary production. The Sweatshop School of Yiddish poets, like the *Yungen* writers who followed them, attracted a solid readership, but one limited for the most part to the immigrant Jewish community in New York City. With the ascendancy of literary Modernism, though, Jewish poets began to play a more central role in broadening the frontiers of poetry in this country. By the time Louis Zukofsky published *An "Objectivists" Anthology* in 1932, Jewish poets were not only finding their way into anthologies; they were creating the literary movements that spawned them. In the decade that followed, poets like Muriel Rukeyser and Theodore Weiss continued to test the possibilities of Modernist styles. In 1946, Weiss founded the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, a journal now published in Princeton, that continues to influence the direction of American poetry.

Through the 1950s and 1960s Jewish poets put themselves in the vanguard of the literary movements that blossomed in the wake of Modernism. And recognition of Jewish poets spread through the ranks of prize committees. Adrienne Rich won the Yale Younger Poets Award in 1951, as John Hollander would in 1957, the same year Stanley Kunitz's *Selected Poems*, a volume that nearly failed to find a publisher, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1960 Delmore

Schwartz received the Bollingen Prize for the collection *Summer Knowledge*. Anthony Hecht's *The Hard Hours* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1968. Recognition of other sorts came too. In 1957 copies of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* were confiscated and its publisher was put on trial for obscenity; but even that notoriety fostered interest in poetry.

In the last decades of the century Jewish poets staked claims across the wide landscape of American poetry. Poets as different as Denise Levertov and Philip Levine, Alicia Ostriker and Robert Pinsky have shown that widely varying experiences of Jewish identity can nurture an equally wide variety of poetic styles. Several of these contemporary poets are represented in this exhibit, but the true richness of the Jewish contribution to recent American poetry was demonstrated when the Leonard L. Milberg Collection of Contemporary American Poetry was assembled in the 1990s. Of the more than 150 poets included in that collection, more than a third are of Jewish heritage.



Bookplate from the library of Batya and Shlomo Greenberg in the Leonard L. Milberg collection of Jewish-American writers in honor of Harold T. Shapiro

ENDNOTES

¹ John Higham, introduction to Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper Torch, 1960).

² Quoted in Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (New York: Schocken, 1989), 567.

³ Irving Howe, *Celebrations and Attacks* (New York: Horizon Press, 1979), 23-24.

⁴ Rebecca Goldstein, "Against Logic," *Tikkun*, November/December 1997, 43.


⁵ Interview with Elizabeth Hardwick, *New York Times Book Review*, April 19, 1979, 61.

Meg Rich and James Weinberger, co-curators of "Not For Myself Alone," would like to extend their thanks to:

- Leonard L. Milberg '53 for making the Jewish-American Writers Collection possible, and to Howard Woolmer for helping us locate its many treasures for use in the exhibition.
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