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# Introduction

Autobiographical writing has seen an upward movement throughout the second half of the 20th century, and all the more so during the 21st. Being supported and sustained to a great extent by the politics of identity, they have worked their way in a tandem from marginality to centrality. With the advent of interculturality and pluralism, special attention was paid to autobiography as a literary genre. It became the principal document supporting the study of the social evolution and history of minorities, whether ethnic, gender, or religious. For most of literary history, however, autobiography was shunned to a cone of silence and invisibility, with critics considering it an insufficiently evolved medium of expression, little more than journal writing. As such, the current focus on it is all the more supported, but still insufficient. Within the span of the past decades, we have begun the study of autobiographical writing, and yet so much of what autobiography is has yet to be addressed.

The present paper aims to offer an addition to this field by exploring autobiographical works signed by Jewish-American writers, melding together the question of identity with this fluid genre. Much like the different faces of the authors, the autobiographies themselves reflect their profound diversity, with each of them thus enlarging the tradition of autobiographical writing. As such, the purpose of the thesis is to explore works hitherto unintroduced in typical autobiographical study, while situating them in a social and historical context. As such, the structure of the paper consists of four chapters, the first two, one dealing with the specific context of Jewry in American, the second creating an overview of studies of autobiography as a genre, from universal, to the highly specific one written by Jewish authors, offering the theoretical background for the final two chapters, where the autobiographies signed by two feminist authors, Gerda Lerner (*Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, 2002) and Letty Cottin-Pogrebin (*Deborah, Golda, and Me. Being Female and Jewish in America*, 1991), and two members of the New York intellectuals, Alfred Kazin (*A Walker in the City*, 1951) and Norman Podhoretz (*My Love Affair with America. The Cheerful Tale of a Cheerful Conservative*, 2000), are compared and contrasted, offering added viewpoints on the genre, but also on the matter of Jewish identity expression in America.

Among the studies referenced in the paper, we mention the following that have aided our research: *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, is considered a seminal book, which offers a complex view on the history of Jewry in America, tracing it back to the 17th century, and reaching present-day concerns, such as diplomatic relations. With the contribution of numerous authors, among whom we recognize resounding names such as Sylvia Barack Fishman, Nathan Glazer, or Jonathan D. Sarna, Kaplan puts together a guide for exploring the specific condition and evolution of Jewishness in the American context, addressing themes such as religion, history, politics, and identity in a series of essays structured around a focal point. The essence of the book lies in the multifaceted approach to American Jewishness, from its beginnings to the present.

Recent decades have seen an increased number of texts dealing with autobiography as a genre, attempting to redeem it from its marginal position. Among them, we mention a few that have helped contextualize our present endeavor. Thomas Couser's *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* underscores the inextricable link between self-writing and the typical American individualism and exceptionalism, America becoming the ideal social context for such forms of artistic expression, since its founding texts themselves, such as the Constitution, encourages the process of self-reflection. For Couser, however, it is important to note the unreliability of memory, and thus any form of memory writing, as it is in "itself a text under continuous unconscious revision" (17), and he deems this profound subjectivity specific to autobiography as one of the major hurdles that the literary historian needs to address in their study of the texts. By contrast, or completing Couser's ideas, Paul John Eakin explores the validity and legitimacy of the autobiographical self in two of his seminal works, *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* and *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Eakin posits that the discrepancy found between one's identity and their narrative identity should not deter us from considering autobiographical writings as valuable artifacts in the study of a context or even of an individual, as those *narrative identities* bear undeniable relevant, becoming "a literary form part of the fabric of our lives experience" (4), and that, what is more, "autobiographies are not merely sources of fact; they *are* facts in and of themselves" (144). Marcus Moseley deals with the specificities of Jewish autobiographical texts in his work *Being for Myself Alone: Origins of*

*Jewish Autobiography*, arguing that, essentially, self-writing and self-awareness are coextensive, and as such with the advent of the politics of identity, it is only to be expected that more autobiographical texts were produced. He draws attention to a distinction in what Jewish autobiographies are concerned. Although they date back to the Middle Ages, they focus less on the individual per se, but more so on exploring the life of the community, more often than not being strictly related to a catastrophe, as “the first-person singular of the autobiographical narrator being, in effect, a trope for the first-person plural of the collective” (Moseley 73).

The first chapter of the present paper aims to provide a historical and social context for the evolution of the Jewish community in America, following its gradual development from the first documented instances of European Jews finding refuge in the New World. As such, we begin our incursion with the year 1654, when twenty-three Sephardic Jews escaping persecution land in what was then New Amsterdam, thus essentially establishing the first Jewish community, instituting the Sephardic tradition, which was to last for the following centuries, despite the ever-growing number of Ashkenazim reaching the transAtlantic shores. Until the 1880s, marked by the ever-growing threat of pogroms and discrimination, particularly across Russia, culminating with the profound disenfranchising force of tsar Alexander the III’s *May Laws*, large waves of migration from Central and Eastern Europe can be noticed. By the beginning of the 20th century, more than 600,000 Jews entered the United States. The overcrowding of the Jewish ghettos in big cities, particularly in New York, gave birth to a particular new setting, one that would influence and mold the generations to come, especially the second one, of American-born Jews. The trope of the tenement housing can be found in much of the literature signed by Jewish authors throughout the first decades of the 20th century, and it has oftentimes been compared to a new image of the Jewish *shtetl*, a reimagining of the typical European communities, and their homogeneity. However, it becomes poignantly and increasingly clearer that this new context demanded a profound change of the traditional mode of life espoused by the Jewish immigrants, with the gradual loss of Orthodoxy and religiosity taking center-stage.

In his 1976 seminal work, *The World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe endeavors to capture the highly specific character of the New York Jewish community, shaped during the course of only four decades, and yet whose image remains deeply etched in the common imagination of 20th century America. The insistence on historicity and on portraying the particular

conditions experienced by newcomers from late 19th to early 20th century constitutes an unrivaled effort, ensuring that the true legacy of this period is maintained in perpetuity, long after the reality of their circumstances fades away with the ever-changing American context. We can, thus, better grasp the urgency of such an endeavor, as it allows future generations the invaluable connection to the revolutionary beginnings of the roots set up by countless representatives of the first generations of what would eventually become the largest Jewish community in the world. Howe explores the process of transplanting Jewishness from Eastern and Central Europe on American soil, emphasizing the precarious condition and the alienation felt by the *greenhorns*, whose entire existence lay in a fragile balance. The American Dream proved elusive for most, and yet the mythology surrounding it, particularly that of the self-made individual, exacted increasing pressure on the newcomers, who felt their insuccess as a personal slight. As Howe notices, they “were therefore inclined to blame themselves” (*Fathers* 77), and a transfer of ambitions and imagined goals can be noticed toward the second generations. The latter’s hyphenated identity meant that for the first time there was a coexistence of Jewishness and Americanness within the same individual.

Specialists like Lloyd P. Gartner or Dana Evan Kaplan insist in their articles included in the *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* on the historical implications of the changes experienced in the early 20th century, particularly in the years immediately prior and after the events of World War II. The process of assimilation ran its course and it brought with it not only a loss of orthodoxy, but a gradual distancing from Judaism and Jewishness altogether. Particularly during the Great Depression, with anti-immigrant sentiments reaching a new historical high, the pressure of discarding the mark of “otherness” was felt more profoundly than ever. While many first generation immigrants did indeed assimilate successfully, the true rift is felt with the advance of the second generation and their coming of age. The parents’ insistence on their children’s implicit Americanness, on their secular education and their full embracing of English as their main language inherently brought with it a widening gap between the two generations. What is even more painfully obvious is that even after leaving the initial ghettos in their upward mobility, due to insidious anti-Semitic tendencies, espoused even by public figures, such as Ford, the second generation found their access blocked from high profile Gentile institutions and amenities, as Jonathan D. Sarna notices, and as such directed their efforts to creating their own counterparts, rivaling the

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former in their value and productivity, while simultaneously creating a “gilded ghetto”, a subculture coextensive with the American one (Sarna 222).

It became painfully clear that Jewish identity was at risk, with both religious and ethnic sides of the self facing the peril of being discarded. As such, in order to undo the negative effects this would intrinsically carry, particularly in light of the characteristic upward mobility of the Jewish communities, no longer tied to the homogeneous neighborhoods of settlement, but now part of suburban America, a reform was needed that would ensure the compatibility of Judaism and Yiddishkeit with the new context the members of the community found themselves in. More and more, as Jonathan D. Sarna explores in his seminal work, *American Judaism: a New History*, there is an insistence on “[re-creating] Judaism in their own generation’s image” (319-320), particularly with the advent of the 1960s. With the highly publicized Eichmann trial in 1961, the new generations realize the urgency of refocusing on Jewish identity, and although that did not include a return to conservative religious observance, it instituted the American Jewish Civil Religion, replacing religiosity with a commitment to the survival of Jewry, to protection against anti-Semitic assaults, and to an awareness of adherence to a group. Deborah Dash Moor, the editor of the volume *American Jewish Identity Politics*, notices in her essay that one of the most relevant by-products of Jewish involvement in the US Armed Forces during the war was that this group adherence was strengthened. There was an immediate understanding of the importance of simultaneously addressing anti-Semitism domestically, in addition to their fight against the international terror. For the first time for an overwhelming majority of young Jewish men, they leave the homogeneity of their mostly urban communities and get to experience the other side of America, the white, rural, Christian one, marked by isolationism, racism, and segregation. A slow process of exposing the public to the horrors of the Shoah is begun with the publication in America of the translated version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in 1952, but it would be another decade before the wider audiences truly accept exposure to the genocide carried out by the Nazis during the war. There is a sense of immediate commonality among Jewish survivors, and an increased interest in supporting the cause of Israel, particularly after the 1967 Six-Day War. Lynn Rapaport notices that a new mythology is created between the binaries of destruction and regeneration, Israel becoming the redeeming element allowing for rebirth and reclaiming. With the advent of the 1960s and ‘70s, identity politics take center-stage, and Jewish identity in America is linked with strong