

CRIMINALITY AMONG THE JEWISH YOUTH

BY HAROLD BERMAN

TWENTY-FIVE or thirty years ago, certain, if not most all, sections of the city of New York, were infested by gangs. The lower East Side, at about the time when the Russo-Polish immigrants came to settle in it in considerable numbers, as well as some other sections of the city—mostly of the water-front outposts or their vicinage—bristled with gangs of roughs, aggregations of youths of varying degrees of criminality and evil behavior, their misdeeds varying from the mere petty acts of hoodlumism and rowdiness, the disturbance of the peace—especially around the time of political campaigns and election days—to acts of robbery and occasional, if more or less rare, murder. Each section of the big city at the time spoken of boasted its own gangs; gangs that were characteristically its own, each one boasting a more-or-less locally or city-wide renowned leader, known for some distinctive characteristic or for certain acts of violence committed by him at some time or other in his career, either previous or subsequent to his assumption of the crown of leadership.

These gangs were exclusively Irish in their composition, both as to leadership as well as to their rank and file. To any one who is at all conversant with the city of New York, as it was constituted in those not so distant days, or to the one who will take the trouble of looking up the records of the police and the higher courts of the period with their rosters of arraignments and convictions, or who will glance through the files of New York City's newspapers of the same period, this contention will become a self-evident fact.

The very thought of looking for Jewish names in the ranks of the professional rowdy and the criminal of that day was as ludicrous as the thought of Antediluvian monsters stalking the sidewalks of Twentieth Century Broadway. For one thing, the Jew, whether of

the older or the younger generation, was but a recent arrival to these shores. He had just come, in his greatest numbers that is, from the teeming Ghettoes of the great Empire of the Czars, and was thoroughly docile and tractable, law-abiding and glad enough to be left alone. He still carried deeply craven in his inner being, and seared into his very soul, the memories of the persecutions that he and his had been subject to in his old home and hence was glad enough to be left alone. Indeed, he greatly feared these gangs and gangsters whether they operated individually or collectively, and the terror that their proximity struck into his heart was not the least one of the trials that he was called upon to endure during the early days of his sojourn in a strange land, adding not a little to the terrors of his already sorely tried existence.

Of late days, however, we are witnessing a phenomenon that is not only new and surprising as far as it appertains to the Jew's comparatively recent sojourn in this land, but marks a new departure in the race's entire millennial history. The reference here is to the outbreak of gangsterism in New York's Ghetto, as has been so sadly and repeatedly exemplified within very recent years. This is indeed a phenomenon that is not to be accounted for on the ordinary and hackneyed grounds upon which we usually base our theories and draw our deductions as to youthful delinquency and moral lapses.

A deeper probing into the soul of the people affected by this new evil, a painstaking study into its innate psychology, as well as the tragedy, or rather, the series of tragedies, through which it passed within recent years; the flames that have seared its flesh and tested its stamina—all these are the indispensable pre-requisites of him who would sit in judgment upon a people at a most critical period in its history.

For, to understand the full and tragic significance of this new evil—and that it is new no one can gainsay—it is but necessary to recall the fact that but a brief while ago, as history is reckoned, the premeditated murder of a human being was an act utterly inconceivable to the Jewish mind. The Ghettoes of the world, real and metaphorical, were singularly free from deeds of violence. As a matter of course, we are treating here of deeds of violence that have their origin and are prompted by individual and subjective motives, and not of those that are the product of organized, commercialized and impersonal traffic such as we behold so recurrently and shockingly in our city of New York at the present day with its organized murder-gangs that murder for hire or a fee stipulated in advance. This

latter species of misdeed was even beyond the comprehension of the Jewish youth at any time in the nation's history. Crimes like these were entirely foreign to the Jewish structure of mind, to the Jew's innate moral sentiments, to his psychology, his inbred habits, his outlooks and racial characteristics.

It shall also be remarked that, while we note a pronounced deleterious change in a certain, small fraction of the Jewish people—the criminal fraction—a change is at the same time also noticeable in the greater bulk of the people. This change consists of the fact that the acts of the criminal are no longer received with that wide-eyed and staggering feeling of surprise and astonishment of the earlier days, but rather with a certain amount of complacent matter-of-factness and fatalism, though not with any less of reprobation. In brief, it is accepted now as but one of the many—albeit the most deplorable—routine details of our common life and its environment; as something inherent, and quite inseparable from it, and as one of the concomitant adjuncts of life in this Land of the Free!

Now, as it is apparent that here must have been some dynamic and elemental force, operating relentlessly and thoroughly within the life of the people, strong enough to bring about this utter and sudden change in the psychology of a people numbering several millions of souls; this complete right-about-face in a people's habits, modes of thought and practice to which it clung so tenaciously for thousands of years; to uproot and almost completely destroy all of this within the brief space of a few years. Indeed, to the student of folk psychology and the social sciences this sad fact would provide a problem of the first magnitude, a puzzle hard indeed to solve.

Superficially, it would seem but an easy matter to invoke the theory of Heredity and, by the mumbling of a few threadbare phrases so dear to the heart of the Empiricist and the Generalizer, discover the underlying cause of this sad phenomenon. Working thus along hackneyed lines and with time-worn tools, it becomes an entirely simple matter. These outcasts, one would say, were simply the inheritors of a baleful tradition. They came of a tainted stock. Their fathers, and their fathers before them, had been afflicted with a criminal Psychosis; and these men have simply inherited the criminal tendencies of their degenerate, criminally-inclined fathers.

This would indeed offer a thoroughly efficacious solution of the phenomenon and dispose of it in easy style were it not for the countering facts in the case. For, as already stated, acts of violence of any kind, and murder in particular, where phenomena practically

unknown among Jews all through their long history—especially so since their dispersion among the nations nearly 2,000 years ago—hence, there could not possibly be any talk of heredity in these instances. Besides, it has been found that almost in all cases, and with very few exceptions, these professional criminals came out of good homes wherein the prevailing atmosphere was anything but criminal. The home in which the most of them spent their childhood and youth—in other words, the most impressionable and character-forming periods of their life—was one that was permeated by a spirit of old-fashioned and simple piety and honesty of living. It was a virtuous, if not always an intellectual atmosphere, and such as usually is found to be conducive to an honest and upright living. And there is no one more shocked and even puzzled by the tragic, and to them inexplicable, denouement in the life of their offspring than these very fathers and mothers who themselves are of undisputed as well as untarnished respectability!

We must search the generalities of the Jewish life in the big cities of America in order to find the genesis of this particular, and unique, phenomenon in the Jew's experience. We must probe the depths of our social, economic and religious life before we can uncover the source of this evil. And this is what one will find as the result of his labors.

Jewish life in America differs radically, if not organically, from the Jewish life the world-over. For, whereas Jewish life in all European and Asiatic lands is indigenous and native, in America it is extraneous and overwhelmingly exotic. While in the old world it is homogenous, bears a certain and well-defined physiognomy, has had time, for centuries past, to strike roots into the soil, has had time to organize itself, to create certain norms and standards, Jewish life in America is yet a thing amorphous, quite formless and entirely chaotic. It is yet in a state of flux and adaptability. It is a plant that had been violently torn up by the roots from the soil of its nativity and transplanted hurriedly to a new soil and climate; and, as is usual in all such cases where the plant and soil have not yet become entirely and inextricably identified with one another, it suffers overmuch from the caprices of the unkind elements.

We see in this instance the tragic exemplification of the age-long and recurrent battle between civilizations; the eternal spectacle of weaker and stronger cultures—strength sometimes denoting mere numbers—come to grips. These have occurred quite often in human history, and, mostly, with tragic results for the weaker race. An

individual being, or even a small group, may come face to face with a strange civilization and, by the innate power of adaption inherent in all of us, not only be no loser by the encounter but actually become the gainer in many ways through the ready adoption of the practices that are the product of other people's wisdom and experience. But it is different with entire nations or considerable bodies of people, and especially so in those instances where the contact, or penetration, has not been voluntary, nor a deliberate or gradual one.

The overthrow and submergence of the highly-civilized Greek State by the mere might of Roman Arms; the overthrow of the Saxon culture by the Normans, the intellectually rich Moorish Kingdom by the Spaniards—and the consequent degeneracy of the Moorish race—the demoralization of the American Indians following upon the abrupt and violent infiltration of the Whites are but a few, though poignant, examples of the workings of this law. Everywhere, the weaker has to yield to the strong not only physically but also culturally, and ere the day of final amalgamation arrives, the day when a synthesis of what is good in the teachings and practices of both peoples is made, there is bound to be a period of demoralization, as well as deterioration, among the members of the weaker race, and the weakest ones morally will suffer the most.

If one will go back a scant fifty years or so, he will find that the number of Jewish residents of the United States was entirely insignificant as compared to the total number of people living in the land. There were then a few thousand of the descendants of the Portuguese Jews, who arrived here in the days of Peter Stuyvesant and his Dutch and English Colonial successors, as well as the small number of the later-arriving German Jews. Their number was small as compared to the aggregate total of the population of the land. And they had had ample time and leisure, during the many years of their residence in the land to organize themselves in the social, economic as well as the religious sense. Their life, in all its variegated and diversified phases, functioned properly and normally, and they had no problems to cope with other than those faced by any other sect or faction of their fellow-Americans. They were already sufficiently and thoroughly acclimated, and the battles, if any, had been fought out in the long ago by their ancestors. Even these, were fortunate in that they had come into a society that was yet in the making and they were moulded with it, the forces that were acting upon the people at large also exerting their benign or other influence over them.

The real problem, however, developed at a much later day. The disturbances in Russia following the accession to the Throne of Alexander III in 1881, followed, in their turn, by the successive cruel edicts of his reign of fourteen years, brought the first great wave of Jews to these shores. The even more savage repressive policies of his successor, Nicholas II, and more especially the bloody pogroms of Jews that took place simultaneously in one hundred and thirty communities towards the end of 1905, following the grant of the so-called mock constitution, caused hundreds of thousands of Jews to rush pell-mell for safety, to flee to the only land that held out the prospect of physical safety, and the chance to earn an honest livelihood unmolested by any one.

This new settlement has not as yet struck its roots deep enough into the soil. It could not have done so in such a brief while, by all the laws governing human society, though what has been accomplished in the way of adaptation is nothing short of the marvelous. The mass of the people is still, ethically and sometimes also economically, hanging in the air. It is trying desperately to adapt itself to its new milieu. Into this effort of adaptation there obtrudes the inevitable and tragic break in the organism; the sad rift in harmony's lute and the occasional snapping of the strings.

Within the great Pale of Settlement of Russia and Poland of old, the Millenium-old Patriarchal order of life has prevailed to this very day, though in a more or less modified form. The bulk of the people were as yet entirely unaffected by the modern industrial system in vogue in most other European lands, and but very little more by the much-different mode of life of their non-Jewish neighbors. Their religious, social and political outlooks, were regulated by a three-thousand-year-old faith and social philosophy, in the exercise of which their temporal rulers interfered but little.

When these men and women—the fathers and mothers of the present generation, came to America they most naturally tried their utmost to continue their own traditional life; the life to which they have been accustomed since their own early childhood and the one that has been the heritage of their people since days immemorial. Their children, on the other hand, quickly become Americanized in thought, manners and action. This, no one will dispute, is a characteristic of the Jew widely noted and not infrequently marveled at. His adaptability is proverbial and almost magical. In a very few years, these children become overwhelmingly the product of the American public school, the American business world and absorb the

American social and economic usages. They go through the great leveling machine, or the great grinding hopper, to emerge as thoroughly different beings, for better or for worse. And then, the gulf, that had separated the two all along, becomes a chasm and is practically unbridgeable! The difference between parents and children in immigrant Jewish families is thus not that of the normal and entirely expected difference between the two generations observed in every other family—representing, in the main, a healthy process of evolution—but rather predicates a break; a violent wrenching and disruption. Hence, all the many cases of juvenile delinquency among the Jewish youth of the city of New York, the running of the gamut all the way from mere truancy and the infraction of minor laws, to that of assault, robbery and forgery and even sodomy and rape, as one can easily find by perusing the records of the Children's Courts of the city of New York, and doubtless the same holds true of many other big cities.¹

Practically every immigrant Jewish home during its years of adjustment harbors a tragedy in miniature. When it is not a tragedy in the physical and the more elemental sense, it is yet a tragedy in the moral, or social, sense. The children generally look upon their elders as upon inferior beings. (It is significant that of the Jewish children committed to institutions in the city of New York, by far the greatest number are the native born children of foreign parentage.) As the children grow older, they display a certain amount of tolerance in their attitude towards their parents; an attitude of tolerance towards their supposed weaknesses. It is an attitude that speaks of stooping patronage towards a lower being, but seldom is one of genuine respect and honor. Every word uttered by the young, every one of their actions and deeds speaks loudly of this deep-seated sentiment. Zangwill, when writing of the London Ghetto—which is in many essentials, though on a much smaller scale, the exact double of its more robust New York sister—has correctly limned this type. The erstwhile Levi Jacobs, son of *Reb Shmuel*, becomes metamorphosed over night into Leonard James and boasts that he “has become a regular Englishman” because he has thrown away his Phylacteries and “breakfasts on bacon regularly.” This

¹ It is interesting to note here that out of a total arraignment of 9,215 in the Children's Courts of the Greater City in 1922, 2,094 were Jewish, or 22.07 per cent. and of these, 60 were charged with assault, 7 with sodomy and rape, 47 with burglary, 3 with robbery, 35 with grand larceny, 49 with petty larceny, 200 with disorderly conduct, while 3 were charged with the carrying or discharging of weapons. The greater number of these culprits were under nine years of age and native born, though of foreign-born parentage.

is the sign manual of the true Englishman to him; and so it is to most of the youth of the Ghetto.

Under such circumstances there cannot be much room for parental authority. At most, there can be mutual tolerance and but a vague sense of obedience on the part of the young towards their elders. And where there is a certain minimum amount of it rendered, it is done but perfunctorily and grudgingly.

Where there is no home life in its deeper and more significant connotation; where a family is practically headless and leaderless, the only result that we can anticipate is anarchy and mobism; a state of affairs that must inevitably lead to most tragic results. The marvel is not that there is so much lawlessness among the young Jews of America, but rather that there is so little of it.

In the final analysis, the gangster evil really belongs to the roster of the latter day Jewish persecutions in the benighted lands abroad and the sudden mass-precipitation of a people into a new Milieu. Its origin is to be found in the mediæval policies of the late rules of Russia and Roumania; policies that resulted in the precipitate uprooting of thousands of families, the disruption of a centuries-old life and its institutions, and the resultant hurtling of great numbers of refugees into a strange environment and among a strange people. Given time to acclimate and grow into the soil, this evil will disappear from their midst. It will be sloughed off even as many other native as well as acquired customs and habits have been sloughed off by them.