Books in Review

A Special People

A HISTORY OF THE JEWS. By PAUL JOHNSON. *Harper & Row. 644 pp. $25.00.*

Reviewed by MARTIN GILBERT

PERHAPS inevitably in our current decade, the vast preponderance of historical writing about the Jews has focused on the Holocaust: its origins, its course, and its implications. Since 1980, the whole globe of Jewish history has seemed to tilt increasingly on a Holocaust axis. It would be absurd to make this a complaint; what we now call the Holocaust has scarred, and will continue to scar, the Jewish consciousness, and will do so to such an extent that many students of universal Jewish themes, myself included, have already neglected, and will go on neglecting, the wider historical and cultural spheres for this one. It is for that reason as much as any that Paul Johnson's new book is to be welcomed. It covers 4,000 years of Jewish history, and although it devotes 10 percent to the five years of the Holocaust, the remaining 90 per cent, in its bold sweep from biblical times to today, is a powerful reminder of Jewish achievement throughout the ages.

I use the word "achievement" deliberately, for Paul Johnson is emphatically not of the school of Sir Lewis Namier, professor of history at Manchester University, England, who, when asked by a non-Jewish admirer why, as a Jew, he did not write books about Jewish history, replied: "There is no such thing as Jewish history, only Jewish martyrology—and that is not amusing enough for me."

Paul Johnson does not neglect the martyrological aspects: Rome, the Crusades, the Inquisition, Chmielnicki, the czarist pogroms, all are here. He strives, however, and in my view successfully, to go beyond the grim episodes of destruction to the rich continuity of creativity. Indeed, from a study of that creativity in its widest aspects (in which Maimonides, Heine, Freud, and Einstein each have an honored and thoughtful place in his narrative), he seeks an answer to the central question of Jewish survival, of the continued existence of the Jews as a recognized group which, despite its relatively small size numerically, has retained its characteristics and identity throughout so many centuries of diversity and dispersal. Johnson veers away from the presentation of Jewish history as "a succession of climaxes and catastrophes." Instead, he sees that history, and tries where possible to present it, as "an endless continuum of patient study, fruitful industry, and communal routine, much of it unrecorded." The historian should bear in mind, he adds, that "Sorrow finds a voice while happiness is mute." This is a salutary remark even for those who write exclusively about the Holocaust.

Johnson draws many universal themes from the Jewish experience. Yet he is careful not to exaggerate the unanimity or even the coherence of Jewish thought. In connection with the emancipatory and cultural revolution at the turn of the last century, for example, he points out that "There was no Jewish world-outlook, let alone a plan to impose modernism on the world." It is therefore a pity, it seems to me, that in the section on the Holocaust Johnson portrays the response of the Jews as specific and unique to them: "Their history, their theology, their folklore, their social structures, even their vocabulary trained them to negotiate, to pay, to plead, to protest, not to fight."

It could be argued with equal force that the Jewish response to Nazi rule was no different from that of all captive peoples: most were cowed, all sought to survive, and when survival by compliance or the passage of time proved impossible, all sought to resist with whatever limited means were at their disposal. The Jews in Warsaw, for example, did so sixteen months before the Poles of that same city, and did so because of the extinction threatening them. Both Jews and Poles knew the essential hopelessness of revolt. To say that it was the Jews who had "learned from long experience that resistance cost lives rather than saved them" is, in my view, too narrow a conclusion: almost every human being under occupation acted in this way. Jews had no special prescription on passivity.

Yet it would be churlish, as some reviewers of the British edition of this book have done, to pick up such errors of fact or interpretation, or to stress particular gaps in the facts, in order to seek to undermine or even to diminish the force and value of the book as a whole. It was Churchill who once said: "I do not come before you as an expert, but as one accustomed to listening to the views of experts." Paul Johnson could certainly benefit from another decade of reading and debate—who could not? But in the time at his disposal since he completed his histories of Christianity, of the modern world, and of the English people—a remarkable trilogy—he has read as widely and absorbed as deeply as any man could, adding his own philosophical outlook as well as an enviable clarity of phrase and theme.

Of course there are mistakes of fact and emphasis; it is certainly untrue, for example, to write of Polish Jewry that by 1939, "the most energetic, adventurous, and above all the most militant, had

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gone to Palestine." Such mistakes are minor, however, compared with the wider grasp of Jewish history which the author's humanistic outlook gives him. This outlook is philo-Semitic in its most profound sense. "The Jewish vision," Johnson writes on his second page, "became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both divine and man-made. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."

After 580 pages of history, that verdict is upheld and enhanced. "No people has been more fertile," Johnson concludes, "in enriching poverty or humanizing wealth, or in turning misfortune to creative account." This capacity springs, he argues, from a moral philosophy "both solid and subtle, which has changed remarkably little over the millennia." In past centuries, Johnson asserts, the great Jewish achievement was "the application of reason to divinity." In recent, more secular, centuries, the Jews applied these same principles of rationality "to the whole range of human activities, often in advance of the rest of mankind."

These "principles of rationality" mean much to Paul Johnson. They are the very principles which he has striven to follow during a thoughtful but often provocative career as a journalist and political guide. Thirty years ago, as editor of the *New Statesman*, he espoused with vigor the viewpoint of the Left in British politics; I was among thousands whose attitudes were molded and whose consciousness was sharpened by his journalism. More recently, he has become an eloquent apostle of the Right—or, rather, of the right of the individual and the rule of law, of self-help, self-assertion, and liberty; here too I have followed his advocacy, as have many others. It is therefore fascinating for me to see the part played by Jewish concepts in so much of our mutual journey, or at least the way in which Paul Johnson, himself a Catholic, uses these Jewish concepts and is inspired by them.

EVERY reader will form his own view as to the centrality of rationality in Jewish thought and practice, as portrayed by Johnson. The section on Maimonides, one of the longest in the book devoted to a single person, is essential to Johnson's perspective. "The more stable and peaceful we make our society," Johnson writes in his two-sentence summary of the thought of Maimonides, "the more time and energy men have for improving their minds, so that in turn they have the intellectual capacity to effect further social improvements. So it goes on—a virtuous circle, instead of the vicious circle of societies which have no law."

In Paul Johnson's world, the rule of law is a vital ingredient to society as it ought to be. That the Jews should have so embraced and indeed enhanced it gives him a feeling of closeness to them, first as precursors and then as maintainers of the one sane ideology. He is doubly drawn to the 12th-century philosopher because of what he sees as the principal desire of Maimonides "for the law, the sword and armor of the Jews, to become the working property of all of them."

That this did not happen to all Jews, or attract all Jews, does not deter Johnson from his admiration of the rational mold of Jewish thought. He sees clearly, and describes clearly, the power of the irrational on medieval minds beset with fear and misery. ("For the mass of ordinary Jews," he writes, "tales of miracles past, hope of those to come, was a surer comfort in time of trouble.") Nor does Johnson mock Jewish mysticism; indeed, his pages about it are as tolerant as the pen that has written them. But in his perspective it is the virtue of the Jews to triumph over mysticism in the end.

Mistakes were made during the course of this triumph: Marx, according to Johnson, was the greatest of those mistakes. Still, in Johnson's panorama the Jews redeemed themselves by their own exertions, of which, for him, Zionism is the 20th century's most praiseworthy example. He thus describes with approval the dream of Moses Hess that the Jews would achieve their own redemption "not by Marx's negative proposal to destroy their traditional economic functions, but by the positive act of creating an ideal state." The creation of that state is set out in considerable detail in its ideological, political, diplomatic, and military phases, and with due weight given to the critical forces within the Jewish world at the time of Zionism's birth, and in the Arab world two decades later.

READERS not well versed in the story may find the detail a little daunting, but it is well worth persevering. In the sections on Zionism Johnson impresses me most by the way in which he has dug out and breathed life into many figures now largely forgotten, among them Arthur Ruppin, who was, he writes, "a sociologist, economist, and statistician by training and he brought this somber but necessary combination of qualities, plus huge industry, persistence, and a grim understanding of Jewish failings, to the business of turning the Zionist idea into a practical reality." More than anyone else, Johnson writes of Ruppin, "he was responsible for the nuts and bolts, the bread and butter, of the new home."

One may certainly learn from this quotation, if only of Ruppin's existence and stature. But one may also see in it a perhaps inevitable weakness in such a vast and at times necessarily cryptic canvas: there is simply no space for further details of Ruppin's early work in Palestine, and no space for his later, changing, views of Arab-Jewish cooperation. Indeed, there are only two further brief quotations from Ruppin, the first about Herbert Samuel as British High Commissioner in Palestine ("a traitor to the Jewish cause"), the second a remark by Ruppin in connection with Jewish crime in America in the era of Prohibition ("Christians commit crimes with their hands, the Jews use their reason").

Personally, I would have welcomed a substantial paragraph on Ruppin's "nuts and bolts" in Palestine. There can, however, be few, if any, accounts of Zionism written by a non-Jew which, for all their brevity, give so factually grounded an accolade to that once noble

"ism" which the United Nations has declared a form of "racism," and which is often condemned without trial, as in the recent London play *Perdition*. Against that play, incidentally, Paul Johnson wrote, at the height of the controversy in London: "The tragic Jewish past repeatedly shows that the fabrication of anti-Jewish myths nearly always, in the end, costs Jewish blood. That is why it was right to prevent the performance of this play in a famous and honorable British theater, and why it will continue to be right to forestall any similar affronts to truth and justice."

TRUTH and justice are not mere catch-phrases for Johnson; they are his philosophical life blood and his link with the Jewish struggle. It is here that he sees Zionism as more than a mere nationalism. Yet he is no starry-eyed propagandist. The dilemma of the Jewish commonwealths in antiquity, he writes, was to try to combine "the moral excellence of a theocracy with the practical demands of a state capable of defending itself." This dilemma has been "recreated in our own time in the shape of Israel, founded to realize a humanitarian ideal, discovering in practice that it must be ruthless simply to survive in a hostile world." But is not this, he asks, a recurrent problem which affects all human societies? And he goes on to write: "We all want to build Jerusalem. We all drift back toward the Cities of the Plain. It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatize these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral."

There then follows the final question of Johnson's book. "But if the Jews have this role," he asks, "who wrote it for them?" His answer may surprise those who see, or who seek, a guiding hand over and above the human one. The Jews did indeed have a role, Johnson concludes, "because they wrote it for themselves"; they believed that they were a special people "with such unanimity and passion, and over so long a span, that they became one."

Letting the Chips Fall?

THE FITZGERALDS AND THE KENNEDYS: AN AMERICAN SAGA. By DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN. *Simon & Schuster. 932 pp. $22.95.*

Reviewed by KENNETH S. LYNN

THE author of *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, an ambitious work of more than 900 pages spanning a hundred years of family history, from the baptism in Boston in 1863 of John Francis Fitzgerald, the infant son of an immigrant Irishman and his second-generation Irish-American wife, to the presidential inauguration in Washington in 1961 of John Fitzgerald's forty-three-year-old grandson and namesake, simply cannot stop talking about the cooperation she has received from the current generation of leadership in the Kennedy family.

She is grateful, Doris Kearns Goodwin writes in the preface to her book, "to Senator Edward M. Kennedy and the Kennedy family, who permitted me to examine the papers of Joseph P. Kennedy and Rose F. Kennedy without ever asking to see a page of what I had written." In recent publicity sessions with the press she has also been pleased to recall her surprise, indeed her amazement, at Senator Kennedy's alacrity in granting her access to the 150 cartons of unprocessed and uncatalogued materials about his parents which suddenly turned up at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston in 1981, and at the willingness of all the Kennedy elders to allow her to make whatever use she wished of the old diaries, letters, tax returns, canceled checks, travel vouchers, and other memorabilia that the cartons proved to contain. How very sporting of the Kennedys to tell an author in effect to let the chips fall where they may! How oddly out of sync, one is forced to add, with the family's traditional treatment of writers.

Apropos of John F. Kennedy's presidential news conferences, the Chicago *Daily News*'s Washington bureau chief, Peter Lisagor, once observed on an oral-history tape that Kennedy successfully conned the reporters who covered him into serving as

> spear carriers for a televised opera. We were props in a show, in a performance. Kennedy mastered the art of this performance early, and he used it with great effectiveness. . . . I always felt that we [reporters] should have joined Actors Equity. Those of us who asked questions should have charged that much extra for speaking lines.

Although the New York *Times*'s Arthur Krock had done unusual favors for years for Joseph P. Kennedy, he was finally so angered by the Kennedy administration's ceaseless efforts to manage the news that in March 1963 he publicly characterized those efforts as a series of "*direct* and *deliberate* actions . . . enforced more cynically and more boldly than by any other previous administration." A month later, Krock's fellow *Times*man, Hanson Baldwin, lodged a similar complaint, citing the administration's "astonishing examples of news repression and distortion, management and control, pressures and propaganda."

For decades before his son became President, Joseph P. Kennedy had been equally given to treating writers with contempt, to seducing them if possible, to threatening them if necessary, and always for the purpose of inflating his family's achievements and keeping its secrets dark. So that Jack's awkwardly composed senior thesis at Harvard, "Appeasement at Munich: The Inevitable Result of the Slowness of the British Democracy to Change from a Disarmament Policy," could be merchandised as a book called *Why England Slept* (1940), Ambassador Kennedy ordered the young speechwriter he had brought with him to London, Harvey Klemmer, to take a look at the manuscript that Jack was still struggling to expand and improve. In the 1980's, Klemmer would recall that

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