

## “My Grandfather’s Papers”

Michael J. Piore

*David W. Skinner Professor of Political Economy, Emeritus  
Department of Economics  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

May, 2024

My grandfather was a leader in the New York Jewish community. When he died my cousins inherited his papers, and several years ago they offered to let me review them as they were about to donate them to the New York Public Library. These papers have continued to resonate in my mind over the intervening years, and especially since October 7<sup>th</sup> Hamas attack on Israel and the war in Gaza.

My grandfather was born in Eastern Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He came to this country when he was a young adolescent, a socialist in the Russian Menshevik tradition (as opposed to the Bolshevik-Leninist tradition). He was educated by the Party and with their support received his law degree from New York University. He subsequently ran for numerous offices in state and city government, never with the prospect of success but in keeping with the Party’s efforts to educate the electorate. For most of his professional life, he was manager and chief executive officer of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a Yiddish language newspaper whose mission was to support the Eastern European immigrant community and ease the efforts of its members to survive and ultimately to assimilate into American life.

His papers were potentially of some historic significance, especially now in understanding the way in which the war in Gaza is affecting American Jewish life. They are certainly of potential significance for me personally in trying to sort through my own complex feelings as a Jew and my own place in my family's history.

In these respects, the papers initially proved disappointing. For the most part they consisted of multiple drafts of a eulogy, which he had prepared for delivery at the funerals of his comrades, as they passed away one by one, and those who survived worked together to guide the newspaper in decline as its once substantial customer base died and the children of its members assimilated into American culture losing the ability to read Yiddish or the need for the guidance which the Forward provided in how to navigate American life. I had in fact attended one of these funerals with him when he was too sick to travel on his own, and I recognized the basic eulogy from that trip. I found it harder to recognize the characters whom my grandfather eulogized, many of whom I actually knew myself as the subject of salacious adult dinner table gossip overheard surreptitiously as a child, and this made it easy to dismiss the eulogy as funeral hyperbole.

But sandwiched in among the various drafts of the memorial was a document which proved to be a good deal more interesting, a pamphlet entitled "The Condition of the Jews in Poland". The pamphlet was actually the report of a mission which my grandfather had led to Poland in 1936 to review the programs of the Joint Distribution Committee. The JDC was an organization created after World War I to provide support to the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe initially in the form of material relief. But by the time of my grandfather's mission it had morphed into an economic development program. What was striking to me was the resemblance between the JDC program of the 1930's and the antipoverty program of the Johnson Administration in the 1960s. The one in fact was the mirror image of the other right down to a microcredit program that anticipated the Grameen bank, an institutional "innovation" for which its inventor was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. The JDC program in Poland moreover, much like the poverty programs in the US, constituted a reaction to pure relief, and the fear that material relief was undermining work incentives and creating a culture of dependency among the Jews. The heart of the two programs were, however, vocational training and work preparation.

The training programs in Poland were designed to equip Jewish workers to participate in a mass production economy understood in very much the way in which Marx had thought capitalist economies would evolve as they developed along the path toward a socialist future. And the text took pains to point out—although it was actually incidental to its basic theme—that the opposition to Jewish advancement came not from the working class but from capitalist employers who whipped up antisemitic sentiment to divert attention from their own role as the real source of oppression.

But what was most striking in the JDC report was the way in which it was infused with a socialist sensibility, a sense of the universality of human experience, which stood out because it was paradoxically in contradiction to the report's focus on a specifically Jewish program and what might have been described as a specifically Jewish problem.

In this, I was reminded of a conversation I had with my grandfather when I was growing up, our first and maybe the only adult conversation (my grandfather was actually a distant figure in my life). I remember it because it was about the distribution of income, a subject which has since become one of the focal points in my professional career. I must have been espousing what I later came to recognize as the theory of marginal productivity of wages, and the justification which it offered for income inequality as an expression of differences in productivity. My grandfather patiently explained that the level of income which we enjoyed in modern society was the product of experience and creativity accumulated over the millennia of human history, a heritage which was shared by all mankind. Next to that heritage, the contribution of any single person, or even group of persons, was trivial.

The foundation of the JDC program was more than that, of course. It was built on the conviction that human history had a direction and that direction was knowable. Its program was an effort to prepare the Jews of Poland to participate in that history. The US employment and training programs were not inspired directly by Marx of course but they shared a similar set of beliefs about the direction in which industrial society is moving, a set of beliefs that in the age of AI

have been largely lost. The war in Gaza raises the question of whether we have also lost the universalism of the Jewish-socialist sensibility. And it is that question which led me to rethink my initial reading of the papers and particularly the eulogy that he was preparing for his comrades' funerals.

The basic theme around which that eulogy was built is the legend of "just men", the legend that at any moment of time in human history there are 36 just men who bear the burden of human suffering, a burden that is so great that if at any moment there were less than these 36 men, the world would collapse from the weight of human misery. That legend was the focus of a French novel The Last of the Just, which was on the bedstand in the hospital when my grandfather was dying.

The novel follows the life of Ernie Levy, the last son of a family which gave birth to a just man in every generation for over 1,000 years. The novel begins with a genealogy of this family and the way in which in generation after generation the just men had died, some in a brutal martyr's death by the sword or in an auto-da-fé, but some just through the humiliation of antisemitic oppression. It weaves through Ernie's life and the way in which he experienced the humiliation and injustice and it ends with Ernie's death in the gas chamber of a concentration camp surrounded by little children, bereft of their parents and sick with dysentery.

The just man story is totally a Jewish story. The central characters are all Jews and what happens to them is a fate shared by all Jews of their generation. And yet it is a universalist interpretation of Jewish identity, almost the opposite of the vision and justification put forward by the leadership of Israel today. Against the background of the war in Gaza, it suggests that we have lost more than a Marxist sense of the direction of history. Can we survive as Jews, can Israel survive as a state without the direction which that legend provides? Was my grandfather's generation really the last of the just?

---

Alternative conclusion.

For me, that is the question which the debate about the war in Gaza, not simply in Israel but increasingly on U.S. college campuses, poses. It is the question of survival, not simply our physical survival – although in the long run certainly that – but our survival as Jews. I am reminded of an argument put forward by Avraham Burg, a speaker of the Knesset in an earlier political era, about the interpretation of the Holocaust and its implications for Israel and its place in the world. Israel cannot survive, he argues, standing alone. It can only do so with the support of other nations. There are two ways of justifying that support and each involves a different understanding of the Holocaust. One is that it is something which Germans (in alliance with much of Europe) did to the Jews. The other is that it is something which human beings did to other human beings. That it is, in other words, something to which we are all capable of engaging both as perpetrators and victims. Israel cannot survive alone, he argued, but we can only gain the support which is necessary to survive in a hostile world by appealing on the basis of the second vision.