

## REVIEW

Excerpt from review of original French edition of *The Jewish Question* by Abram Leon  
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# The Study of Man: Prejudice and Capitalist Exploitation

BY OSCAR HANDLIN

The question of how and why this situation came to exist has usually been skirted. McWilliams, too, passes the question by with the comment that it is interesting but irrelevant. But the importance of the problem did not escape the attention of a young Polish Jew who spent most of his short life in Belgium. As a member of Hashomer Hatzair—a left-wing Zionist group—Abram Léon absorbed Borochof's interpretation of the Jewish situation, and his awareness of the problem must certainly have been sharpened during the war, when he became a member of the section of the anti-German underground allied with the Fourth International. Actively engaged in the resistance movement, he nevertheless found time to compose a shrewd analysis of the historical sources of the Jewish economic position, and had just about finished this book when he was arrested. In Auschwitz, at the age of 26, he met the fate of millions of his fellows.

Léon's approach is that of the orthodox Marxist (by this, I do not mean to dismiss, but only to identify his point of view). His analysis, despite errors of detail, is refreshingly lucid and sensible, and it offers us the opportunity to examine a solid statement of the materialistic interpretation of the Jewish question.

Running through two and a half millenia of the Jewish past, Léon finds two points of crisis in the secular history of that people. The first crisis occurred at the point when the economy of the Roman empire broke down and gave way to the kind of natural economy associated in Western Europe with feudalism, a mode of production characterized by self-sufficient agriculture and the absence of commerce. This transformation coincided with the emergence, as state religions, first of Christianity and then of Islam. Léon believes that these developments set in motion a selective process that froze the Jews in commerce; that is, the settled Jewish farmers tended to be absorbed by the dominant creeds, and only those continued to adhere to Judaism who had the relative independence of the trader's status.

At this stage, Léon continues, a rigid and exceptional occupational pattern was fixed upon the Jews. In the

long period until the 13th century, while the whole of Europe lived by agriculture, the Jews engaged in itinerant trade. And since all those with whom the Jews dealt were self-sufficient, that commerce of necessity centered largely on the importation of luxuries and catered to the tastes of the nobility, who alone had the surpluses to pay for them. Of necessity also, the Jews engaged in usury to finance the feudal lords in the frequent intervals when the manors failed to produce sufficient surplus. Naturally, the status of the Jews was high and they enjoyed the protection of the highly-placed.



This relatively pleasant situation began to change in the era of the Crusades. The natural economy disintegrated as exchange developed. But now commerce and mercantile capital were directly connected with production; the objects of trade were no longer exotic luxuries, but the products of industry. (The famous Italian banking houses, for instance, established themselves in the woolen business.)

The Jewish merchants, unable to enter the new commerce, were gradually excluded from all trade. Consequently they were compelled to live by usury and by its ancillary occupations, pawnbrokering and dealing in secondhand goods. In this role they batted off the nobility and off the townspeople who ultimately became their bitter enemies. For a time the sovereign, who profited by extorting the wealth of his subjects through the Jews, offered some protection. But ultimately the hostility of the new middle class and the gentry led to harsh measures, to the growth of the ghetto, and finally to exclusion. A remnant of Jews saved themselves only by migrating eastward to Poland and Bohemia, less-developed regions still in the natural economy stage.

Thereafter the Jews hung on in the West only on a very marginal basis until the end of the 18th century, when emancipation loosed the old restrictions and assimilative forces began steadily to absorb the new citizens into the sprouting national states. But at that very

moment the position of the Eastern Jews, which had been quite favorable until then, began to deteriorate through the workings of the same forces which had operated in the West several centuries earlier. In Poland and in Russia, a new middle class rising from the disintegration of the old economy was jealous of the place of the Jews in commerce and in the professions. Competition for status led to political restrictions upon the Jews and to emigration to France, Germany, and England, which only worsened the position of their co-religionists in the West.

At this point the internal contradictions of capitalism deprive the Jews, a marginal group at best, of the last vestiges of security. Excluded from the cartels of the great capitalists, the Jews are driven into speculation, a development which offers the monopolists an opportunity to divert the discontent of the masses to the Jews

alone. Theorists begin to distinguish between "bad" (speculative) capital and "useful" (productive) capital, terms which Nazi economists eventually translate into parasitic-Jewish and productive-national. Ultimately the masses fall subject to a new ideology which identifies speculative capitalism with Judaism, and contrasts it with a planned national socialist economy, which is really war capitalism. Under the successive blows of persecution in the name of this ideology, the Jews are helpless and take refuge in a nationalism of their own.



By this survey Léon attempts to demonstrate that the Jewish question is the outcome of an identification of the Jewish group, through definite historical circumstances, with certain limited occupations which the rest of the society finds inferior or degrading or hostile.