

BRANDEIS'S ZIONISM

Letters of Louis D. Brandeis
(1913-1915)

Edited by M. I. Urofsky and D. W. Levy
State University of New York Press,
750 pp., \$20

Reviewed by Joel Carmichael

Zionism, which created the State of Israel, is no doubt the most successful political movement in recent history—at least in the sense that its founders attained their goal. That goal—an independent Jewish state—was itself, to be sure, a way station to something far broader in scope, that is, the radical overhauling of the world Jewish community, the redefinition of its position among the nations, and ultimately, perhaps, the “healing” of the individual Jewish psyche.

This broader, more diffuse, and utopian aim cannot, of course, be said to have been realized, but if one accepts the more limited goal as the quintessential objective of the folk movement known as Zionism, it must be admitted that, in sharp contrast with other contemporary movements, several of which—Marxism, socialism—it was competing within the recruitment of followers, Zionism reversed a condition of Jewish helplessness that was almost 2500 years old.

Louis Dembitz Brandeis, famous as a legal thinker, a Supreme Court justice, and a liberal in the old American tradition, played a role in the Zionist movement that is not generally familiar to those who recall him as an American celebrity.

Yet it was a role that faithfully reflected an abiding interest and a fundamental facet of his character. It is pointed up with great clarity in the third volume of his letters, for the years 1913–1915.

During the latter half of this period, Brandeis functioned as chairman of the provisional executive committee on Zionist affairs; he was, in fact, regarded as the leader of American Zionism, by virtue of both his office and his eminence. His letters on Zionism, interspersed with countless others relating to his remarkable range of professional and personal interests, tellingly outline the degree of his devotion to the Zionist idea—the re-

Joel Carmichael, author, editor, and translator, has written several books on Karl Marx and Russia.



Culver Pictures

Judge Louis Brandeis flanked by Nathan Straus (left) and Rabbi Stephen Wise—*Leaders of American Judaism and strong supporters of the Zionist cause.*

birth of Jewish self-respect prior to the establishment of a Jewish state—as well as the character of his officeholding in the Zionist movement.

Brandeis's relationship to Zionism is of some dramatic interest, in retrospect, because—as his editors make clear in tidy, authoritative footnotes—his career as a Zionist official was rather brief. He was, in fact, dislodged from his position in the movement a few years after the First World War by a revolt in which the key figures were Chaim Weizmann, later the first president of the State of Israel, and Weizmann's principal ally in American Zionism, Louis Lipsky. During the period of Brandeis's leadership, Lipsky was chairman of the executive committee of the Federation of American Zionists, and thus more or less directly subordinate to Brandeis. The bulk of the organizational Zionist letters in this volume are addressed to him.

Brandeis's abilities were so unusual—a penetrating intelligence with a core of common sense, a gift of expression, a tranquil authority—that his elimination from the Zionist movement must be explained by impersonal, i.e., “historical” factors.

Brandeis must seem to us now a mason—politically speaking, a creature of another age. He seems to straddle what we can see was a transitional period in the life of modern Jewry: the jump from the traditional Jewish community, largely segregated from its neighbors, to the Jewish community that began, no doubt after Napoleon, to be institutionalized by

forces functioning autonomously within itself and streaming outward to interact with other forces in the larger society.

Brandeis's leadership came to him with ease: It was presented to him, so to speak, on a platter. He was the age-old distinguished Jew who, having made his career in the outside world without rejecting his origins, comes back to “represent” his fellow Jews essentially by virtue of what he is.

Brandeis was what had been known in a former generation as a *stadlan*, an intermediary between the Jewish community and its gentile rulers. The *stadlan* was generally a man of affairs sufficiently elevated beyond the ruck of average Jews to be close enough to frequently minded rulers—say, in Eastern Europe—for them to use him as a channel to the Jewish community; in his turn he would give the rulers his opinion of what would be good for their Jewish subjects.

BRANDEIS'S SPECIFICALLY “Jewish” career was, in fact, a mere reflection of his career in the great world. It was only after he had distinguished himself there, as he indicates, that his integrity as a man inclined him to take up the affairs of his people, to demonstrate, in fact, both to them and to the world at large his loyal concern. Although that concern crystallized in the “nationally” self-conscious program of Zionism, Brandeis was only too aware that his goal throughout was totally “American.” As he said (in a letter of October 3, 1914, to Lipsky): “In order to be better Americans

we must be better Jews; to be better Jews we must become Zionists.”

This formula summed up his attitude; its priorities are unmistakable. It is not the least surprising to read (in a letter of November 14, 1914, to his go-between, Jacob De Haas) that he had given “little thought to the problems [of the Jews],” except through making much of the point of “showing by our lives a due appreciation of the opportunities [of America].”

By and large, it was this preoccupation with America that seems to have led him to embark on his identification with Zionism in the first place. Or rather, there was an organic convergence, as it were, between his Jewish sentiments and his American identity. He felt that the similarity between American ideals and the immemorial Jewish ethos was paramount. He descended to the Jews, so to speak, from the plateau of his American high-mindedness.

In his essential detachment from Jewish life, Brandeis seems to resemble, curiously enough, the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, who had come back to the Jews from a career as a cosmopolitan playwright and journalist whose cultural roots were to be found in Vienna and Paris. Brandeis’s remark, at the outset of his Zionist incarnation, that he had always been “separated from Judaism and very ignorant of things Jewish,” might have fitted Herzl like a glove. The difference may only be that Herzl, after initiating his version of Zionism on the highest possible level (conversations with the kaiser, with the Rothschilds, etc.), died so young (at thirty-four) that it was possible for his initiative to be snatched up after his death in 1905 by more “Jewish” Jews, by the children of the Russian-Jewish *shtetl*—such as Weizmann—before anyone had time to make much of the discrepancy between Herzl’s ideals and his personal history.

In the case of Brandeis, who only when well into his fifties expressed an interest in the Jewish affairs from which he felt so remote, his concern coincided with the upsurge enthusiasm for Zionism that was beginning to enthrall quite “ordinary” Jews—the Jews in the Jewish “street.” It was precisely, in fact, the degree of organization imposed on the leaders of the nascent movement by the involvement of these ordinary Jews—soon to be called the “Jewish masses”—that accounted for the emergence of Weizmann and Lipsky.

In a word, the times were changing. Brandeis and his contemporaries were witnessing a sociopolitical shift of incalculable consequences. It is this shift that enables us to assess the quality of Brandeis’s performance as leader. From

the moment he was elected a delegate to represent the American Zionists but was obliged to decline an invitation to attend a World Zionist Congress in Vienna, it was plain that his function in the movement was somehow different in kind from that of those who were rapidly and visibly becoming “pros”—a concept that during Brandeis’s leadership of the movement was not quite clear and that did not really become clear for another few years.

Brandeis’s whole style revolved around his lofty detachment: His stance was that of instructing his minions to do this and that. A letter to a subordinate (B. Perlstein, on September 18, 1914), for instance, is revealing: “I trust Mr. [Nathan] Straus will be able to induce Dr. [Stephen S.] Wise to accept the chairmanship [of a certain committee].”

It was only natural for Brandeis to “arrange” things from on high—that was, after all, where he was.

“To be better Americans,” wrote Brandeis, “we must be better Jews; to be better Jews we must become Zionists.”

When he asks the same subordinate (in a letter of November 29, 1914) to request Lipsky to caution organizers of [his] meetings to select rather small halls,” we seem to glimpse the star invited to grace a reunion by his presence.

It is possible to survey Brandeis’s work during his “Zionizing” (as he referred to it to his brother). That work consisted in the main of personally persuading non- or anti-Zionists on a scholarly, quasi-philosophic level, of presenting them, in fact, with an urbanely composed brief as to why it was, on the whole, a good thing to become a Zionist. If this is contrasted with the incredibly arduous, tenaciously molelike labors of the “popular” leaders of the movement—like Weizmann, Shmarya Levin, and Lipsky—it is plain that we are contemplating an involvement of an altogether different kind.

Brandeis’s interests were multifarious: They encompassed legal theory, administrative law, corporate business structures, ordinary business enterprise, etc. In this broad spectrum his Zionism could hardly have been more than a hobby; and as a hobby it was no doubt bound to be swamped, regardless of his sincerity, by the growing organization of the Jewish community.

The very success of the movement entailed Brandeis’s eclipse as leader. His position as *stadlan* gradually became untenable; by the end of the First World War, with the success of Weizmann’s

Zionist group in London in securing the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which laid the foundations for the State of Israel thirty years later, it seemed inevitable that Brandeis would be eased out of organized Zionism by a conjunction of Weizmann’s and Lipsky’s efforts, culminating in the Cleveland Zionist Convention of 1921.

It is plain that Brandeis’s intelligence, honesty, and zeal could not replace intense personal contact or make up for the absence of what is summed up, in short, as *commitment*. As fund-raising efforts became substantial, as bureaucracy evolved, as the “masses” came to be represented through elections, the whole style in which Brandeis had been “representing” them swiftly became obsolete. By the time the Balfour Declaration, with all its shortcomings, came to be implemented, transforming the organized Zionist movement, both in Palestine and throughout the world, into a quasi state, it was inevitable that personal elevation, personal leadership itself, would become bureaucratized. To put it in historical terms, the process of representation had been transformed from elitist ambassadorship to the hurly-burly of mass politics.

Brandeis was aware of this in a way, but somewhat inadequately. In a letter (November 24, 1915) to his friend Norman Hapgood, editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, he commended an article written by Hapgood that referred to the eminent financier and philanthropist Jacob H. Schiff as a “court Jew.”

FROM THE POINT of view of mass politics, to be sure, that was what Schiff was, but from that same point of view Brandeis himself, though far more entangled in politics, was just as remote from the day-to-day drudgery of the movement as was Schiff. Indeed, if we view the process in perspective, we might say that Brandeis was midway between Schiff and Weizmann.

There is one more bit of byplay that I think must enliven our contemplation of the unawareness of people undergoing history. In a letter to a newspaper (*Die Wahrheit*, November 2, 1915), Brandeis laid heavy emphasis on the “outstanding problem of the Jews of America” as being “organization.” If it is true that this letter was composed—as the editors say with assurance—by Lipsky, whose own contribution to the movement was just this element of “organization,” it is surely intriguing that Brandeis should have signed a text written by a subordinate epitomizing the historical factor that was to eliminate Brandeis from the movement. In historical developments there is never a shortage of irony. □

Books in Brief

Current Books in Short Compass

AN AMERICAN VERDICT
by Michael J. Arlen
Doubleday
216 pp., \$6.95

In 1969 Black Panther Fred Hampton was shot in a raid by the Chicago police. In the months that followed, two special grand juries were convened to look into charges that the shoot-out, which the Chicago police claimed had occurred between themselves and the Panthers, had been one-sided, that the police had, in short, killed an unresisting opponent. The man held responsible for the shooting was State Attorney Edward Hanrahan, whose men had executed the raid. Hanrahan gave out the press releases and the explanations and was in all matters relating to the raid the spokesman for the police side. In the end, the grand jury failed to indict him (though in the next election, he lost the state attorney job for Cook County to a Republican). The failure to indict Hanrahan, against what Mr. Arlen clearly considers to be the incontrovertible evidence of his guilt, is presented, with understandable delicacy, as "an American verdict." In an era when no jury could be found in America that would convict a black militant of anything, it could not have been easy for Mr. Arlen to make a serious todo about the American nature of the injustice here. Still, he gives it a try. This is a book about Chicago politics, too—about the Democratic machine, about the lower-middle-class Irish and Poles who are a part of that machine—and, in

its supercilious way, about Chicago itself. The Chicago police and their wives and the cops who attend Policemen's Recognition Night are rendered with what Mr. Arlen means, no doubt, to be restraint. But the very grain of this work is moral superiority, and very few are the details that escape that grain. That tone aside, the problem with Mr. Arlen's book is his devotion to a glancing impressionism, which swoops down to offer a word about politics here, about style there; almost always, Mr. Arlen has a word to say about style. One reads more than once that Judge Romiti (who failed to indict Mr. Hanrahan) wore an orange shirt under his robes; Mr. Arlen has a fastidious eye for the small vulgarities to which the unjust are prone. One has the feeling one has seen this sort of writing before, and one has, of course; it is a remarkably callow book, the sort that gives proof, if any is needed, that moral superiority is an insufficient reason to take up writing.

PENTIMENTO: A BOOK OF PORTRAITS
by Lillian Hellman
Little, Brown and Company
234 pp., \$7.95

Pentimento is a painter's term to describe what happens when the paint on canvas ages, becomes transparent, and shows the original lines of conception that were not meant to be seen in the finished work. Thus, the old conception is, after time, seen in another way, and that is the name of the artistic principle

Miss Hellman has affixed to her book of portraits. It is an illuminating touch, but it could not have mattered much had no name been given to that which orders the imagination here, for past and present are equal in the overpowering reality the characters have. What was once vested in a great uncle, a richly mad friend, a turtle, is not less now, and is perhaps more. It is the force of original vision that keeps the portraits true, their drama tense and present. Indeed, it is one of Miss Hellman's virtues that she yields very little to the passage of time; it is as though the very clarity of old relationships that is set down here were proof against the altered vision. The portraits of Julia and Arthur W.A. Cowan are small masterpieces, each in its own darkly moving way. At the heart of these, and of all the portraits, there is a somberness that lives, side by side, with a most profound wit. The portraits are of friends, relatives, lovers, and of other times. But in the end, of course, it is Miss Hellman's sensibility that has the best sustained character, with the nose always quivering after the drama that will, after all, be found in the meanest of lives, after the joke that will be found in the soberest time. There are not many sensibilities about that give pleasure in the peculiarly sharp way that hers does, in proof of which contention there is this book of portraits.

IN THE MIDDLE OF A LIFE
by Richard B. Wright
Farrar, Straus & Giroux
320 pp., \$7.95

An unemployed salesman for a greeting-card firm in Toronto is confronted with the fact that he has little to show for himself, at forty-two, but the remnants of family life and of a minor literary ambition. There are flying visits from a vacuously appealing teenage daughter and a former wife of wintry disposition. Still, Mr. Wright's protagonist has his hopes for a good life and has, in his dolorous way, managed to hang on. Mr. Wright was determined to make his character an essentially positive sort, and that determination shows, with a certain monotony, throughout the novel. Nonetheless, he is an appealing figure, and he appeals from a novel that works. Mr. Wright has a canny ear for dialogue and for the rhythms of speech, and better still, he has a sense of the detail that is necessary to confer on one's characters if they are to be of any interest. It is a contemporary novel; that is, it deals—and deals handily—with what passes for contemporary ideas. If it is not a profound novel, it is nevertheless a literate and an absorbing one.

DOROTHY RABINOWITZ



"Hi there. All the world's a freeway, and we spend our lovely hours staring at one another and then are no more."