

## CLASSIC CHOICE

DAVID HERMAN celebrates  
Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money*

There are two great novels written about the Jewish immigrant experience of the tenements and sweatshops of the Lower East Side. Both were written not by immigrants but by sons of immigrants and are told from a child's point of view. They were almost immediately forgotten only to be rediscovered in the 1960s and '70s. One was Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and the other was Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930).

What is immediately striking about *Jews Without Money* is the energy of the prose. It grabs you right from the beginning with its short, punchy sentences:

"I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy. ... Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street

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never failed them. It was an enormous excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks.

"People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried."

Everywhere there is the sheer variety and plenitude of Gold's world. At one point he describes a "fat, haughty prostitute", wearing "a red kimono". But it is not enough just to have the kimono. It must be described in all its detail, "decorated with Japanese cherry trees, mountains, waterfalls and old philosophers". This is a new kind of Jewish-American language, bursting with words, overflowing with things, 20 years before Saul Bellow's *Augie March*.

This is fresh, street-level American. At one point, the neighbourhood boys go swimming: "We were naked, free and cocoo with youngness". The sun looks down "on his little riffraff Yids". A few pages later the rain comes down, it "was warm and sticky; it spattered on the tin roofs like a gangster's blood". This kind of energy, too, is something new in Jewish-American writing.

Then there are the low-life characters who fill the novel. Prostitutes with "meaty

legs", chewing Russian sunflower seeds. Small-time hoods and gangsters, Harry the Pimp and Louis One Eye. We are a world away from the moonlit nights and sentimentality of the early Yiddish immigrant writers. It is Harry the Pimp who gives young Mike his first book and tells him to study English. Characters appear for a paragraph or a page. Then they are gone, a splash of colour or pathos. There is Masha the blind prostitute. For a joke, the other prostitutes send a Chinaman to her cubicle. "She was blind and didn't know the difference".

And there is Louis One Eye, the nastiest villain in the book, who "ruined Nigger's sister when she was fifteen". Gold's honesty about the racism and violence of the Lower East Side contribute to both the energy and realism of his writing.

At times, the writing achieves an extraordinary pathos, usually because of illness or poverty. There is Reb Samuel, the Chassidic umbrella-maker, and his wife, "a tiny, grey woman, weighing not more than 90 pounds, and sapped dry as a herring by

work". The narrator visits their workshop:

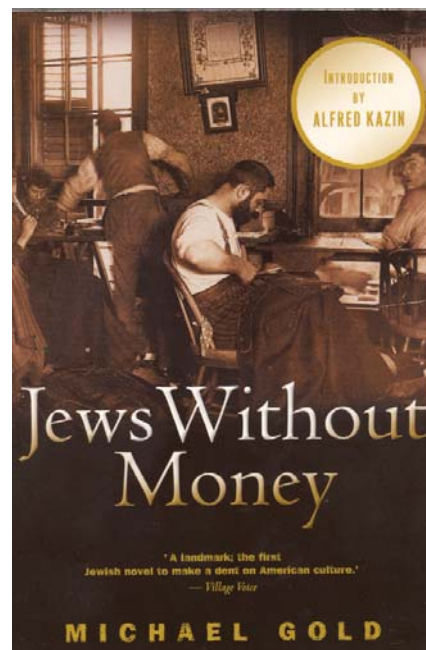
"The shop was a dreary hole. It stank like a sewer of glue, dyes, damp cloth and human bodies. Three girls worked at machines alongside of Reb Samuel, sewing umbrella tops. His oldest child, Rachel, a girl of 15, drilled holes into umbrella handles at another machine. His little wife steamed umbrellas onto the ribs at a big copper kettle."

One day, the narrator goes to take some eggs to Nigger's father, the near-blind tailor:

"He sat crosslegged on a table under the gas jet, hunched in the working pose of tailors. He was sewing an expensive coat. A dirty rag was tied around his throat, and a towel around his forehead. God had given him a cancer. Its faint sickly violet smell mingled in the room with the stink of dirt, old lumber, chamber pot, bed linen, greasy dishes, and despair."

Finally, there is the narrator's father himself, the saddest figure of all. Swindled by his cousin, he lost his shop. He tried his hand as a house-painter but then breaks his feet in an accident. He ends up as a banana-peddler:

"I met my father near Cooper Union. I recognised him, a hunched, frozen figure in an old overcoat standing by a banana



cart. He looked so lonely..."

They walk home together, down Second Avenue. "I am a greenhorn," says his father, "but you are an American! You will have it easier than I; you will have luck in America!"

There are two stories here. First, the story of coming to America. America is always two-sided, the promised land but also a place of terrible poverty and failure. The second story, is that of fathers and sons. The father can't speak English. He tells stories, loves Yiddish plays and reads newspapers, but it's the son who reads books and speaks English. The son is the hope in the promised land but there is a catch – he is also the American who has broken away from his parents, from their traditions and values. It is an old story, familiar to us all, but it has rarely been more powerfully told.

David Herman is a freelance writer and teaches at the London Jewish Cultural Centre

## MIKE GOLD IN BRIEF

- 1890 Born in New York as Itzok Isaac Granich, son of Jewish immigrants
- 1917 Went to Mexico to evade draft
- 1920s Returned to live in New York  
Became involved in left-wing journalism (*The Liberator*, *The New Masses*)
- 1930 Wrote *Jews Without Money* - his only novel
- 1930s Leading left-wing journalist in the 'Red Thirties'
- 1967 Died, obscure and largely forgotten

*Jews Without Money* is available in paperback, published by Carroll & Graf in New York, with an introduction by Alfred Kazin.