

Joseph Butwin
English, University of Washington
joeyb@u.washington.edu
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OLD COUNTRIES: A JEWISH WRITER IN THE SOUTHERN DIASPORA

He was of the first generation of free men. He, along with thousands of other Negroes, came North after 1919 and I was a part of that generation which had never seen the landscape of what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country. —James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

The favorite text of my father, among the most earnest of ministers, was not, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” but “how can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.” —James Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto” in *Notes of a Native Son*

James Baldwin, of Manhattan and the Bronx, writing in the early 1950s, cannot remember his father’s southland but he absorbs its ethos, mostly through his sermons. In an earlier essay called “The Harlem Ghetto”—first published in *Commentary* (1948) and later as a companion to “Notes of a Native Son”—Baldwin enlarges his sense of the endless displacement that defines the spiritual lives of black Americans. The twice-uprooted African sees himself “the wandering, exiled Jew” (66), “At this point, the Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew,” an identification that is not erased but only rendered more complex by the simultaneous identification of the Jew with the unloved shopkeeper, landlord and boss whom the ex-southerner meets in Harlem. His most available white man is the Jew; the spiritual legacy that has sustained him is also deeply Jewish. An ancient story inherited across several generations from sermons, folklore and popular spirituals bumps into daily life, and both impressions survive, side by side. Baldwin may have expected that the original readership of “The Harlem Ghetto,”—that is, the largely Jewish readership of *Commentary* in 1948—would have recognized in the title of the piece and in its dominant analogy elements of their own experience: the essay was meant to bridge a gap.

The analogy of the Jewish diaspora is familiar; it has been evoked again and again by a wide variety of people dispersed under a wide variety of conditions. English Puritans, Irish Catholics, American Blacks, Native Americans . . . it is a compelling story and bears repetition. In today’s section on “History and Memory” there are several elements of Baldwin’s account that I wish to isolate and pursue in ways that I think pertain to the intellectual and spiritual lives of Jews and Southerners—black and white—in the middle of the twentieth century as well as here, today, in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2011—because at a conference such as this we are all heirs of several generations of writers, artists and historians who came of age in the middle of the last century, between 1920 and 1960, and who dedicated themselves to the literary, artistic and historical reconstruction of worlds whose loss they *almost witnessed*.

I want to stress “almost witnessed” for it is my impression that much of what passes for “memory” in our current diction—in spite of an avalanche of “Memoirs”—is really a kind of surrogate memory, borrowed from elders within what one takes to be one’s own community or frankly adopted, or adapted, on permanent loan from other, comparable communities. A musician like David Grisman, of Hackensack, New Jersey, is as comfortable strumming Southern mountain tunes with Jerry Garcia on an album called “Shady Grove” as he is playing the same instruments for what he and Andy Statman call “Songs of our Fathers,” a collection of down-home renditions of the *klezmerim*. We hear a great deal about fathers and grandfathers in this tradition. In the splendid essay written nearly 100 years ago—“Democracy versus the Melting-Pot” (1915)—Horace Kallen describes a curious reversal of the generations of immigrants. First generation does anything it can to establish itself; second generation assimilates; third returns to the culture of the first: “Men change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religion, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers” (122). On the lecture circuit after the publication of his *World of our Fathers* (1976)—which also could have been grandfathers—Irving Howe used to apologize for having been born in the Bronx, not on the Lower East Side. And yet he sneaks passages from what he calls “an unpublished memoir” into the text as evidence of a life he didn’t quite lead. Twenty years earlier Howe introduced a postwar public largely innocent of Yiddish to the classic literature of that language in recent translations in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1953). Dedicated “To the Six Million” Howe’s anthology could be said to be a memorial, but for very few of its readers did it constitute *memory*.

And that, I should add, would include some of its translators, two of whom were my parents, Julius and Frances Butwin. Howe used several stories from a collection that they had published immediately after the War with Crown Publishers in New York called *The Old Country*. It almost rimes with the language Baldwin uses to evoke the old south—“what Negroes sometimes call the old country” which for James Baldwin, who published through the postwar period in *Commentary*, may have been a conscious allusion. Although both of my parents were born in the “the old country” I want to suggest that for both of them the act of translation was something closer to a borrowed memory, an inherited impulse which would in turn feed the surrogate memory of American readers, Jew and Gentile, in postwar America. A vast amount of cultural production in the postwar period begins precisely where memory has depleted itself. Writing fills that gap.

I will begin with the example of my own parents, and then by way of comparison I will call on several writers who might be considered a part of what my colleague, the historian James Gregory, calls “The Southern Diaspora” in a book of that name (2005). My mother, I should add, belonged to both of these migrations—for she spent the first decade of her life in Warsaw, Poland; the second in Charleston, South Carolina (of course), and the rest of her life in the true North: St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, where, strange to say, she made the acquaintance of several southern writers-in-exile.

But before I appeal to the example of my parents, let me first make what has become in our litigious nation a standard disclaimer: although my current project is the writing of a biography of these two people—Julius and Frances Mazo Butwin (several of whose names I share) I am not breaking the rule that I have set for my speculations today: the book that I am writing is not a memoir and I am not exercising personal memory (apart from the task of writers and scholars—to remember and acknowledge their sources). I am writing a book whose narrative concludes in the summer of 1946 when I was not yet three years old. Apart from what I take to be the impression of a foot—perhaps my own—in the sand at Folly Beach (a rare visit to the sea side on the part of a middle western infant), I have no memory of a trip to South Carolina late that summer or the book signing that my mother shared with John Bennett, author of *Doctor to the Dead*, at the Book Basement, belonging to John Zeigler and Edwin Peacock at number 9 College Street in Charleston—though I conclude a fragment of my work published as “Tevye on King Street” (*American Jewish History*, 2007) with that event. In short, I too enter the scene in the aftermath of what I write.

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In an introduction to *The Old Country* which she wrote in the spring of 1946 just a few months after my father’s death, my mother includes a tribute to her husband.

One Sunday last November, which turned out to be the last day of his life, my husband was talking about his grandparents. He told how his grandfather used to take him walking by the river; how he loved watching his grandmother roll out the thin yellow sheets of dough for noodles. He said, “For me they were the ideal grandparents.” And I think that in a restricted but no less real sense the life they represented was to him an ideal life. He was aware of its limitations, its misery and hardship, but he also understood its dignity, its warmth, and most particularly its humor. He was a product of all these things. And it gave him rare pleasure to be able through these translations to interpret that life to his contemporaries. (*OC* xii)

When I first read these lines and for a long time thereafter I made a silly mistake. The walk by the river, the grandfather, the grandmother and her *lokshn* all sounded remarkably like Europe, like Volkavysk, near Minsk which he left before he could walk. Was my mother kidding? Finally I asked. No, she wasn’t kidding. The river was the Mississippi, the town St. Paul. Now another part of her narrative makes sense:

He used to say that he knew the geography of Walkowisk as well as that of St. Paul. Here was his grandfather’s mill, there the Long Street, here the cheder where his father used to teach as a young man. And that mill, that street, that cheder could just as well have been in Kasrilevka or Verebivka, in Boiberik or Hashchavata. For all of those towns, real or mythical, in White Russia or the Ukraine, in Galicia or Lithuania, belong to the same

country to which our parents and grandparents referred when they spoke of *in der heim* or home. (OC xi-xii)

Again, Baldwin's idiom is her own. Home—rather, the old home that Crown Publishers called *The Old Country*, was that place that you almost knew. It may, as in the case of my father's early years along the river flats of the Mississippi, have melted into one's own environment (Harlem, the Bronx) but it also remained a distinct, distant and to some degree “mythical” place.

My mother had every reason to remember Warsaw. She lived there until she was eleven years old; during her last year in Warsaw she kept a diary—in Polish—which she carried to America. It's called “Thoughts, Dreams and Memories.” She was well-schooled by the family of an important Yiddish folklorist—the sisters of Nahum Prilucki—but the language of instruction was Polish. Yiddish she learned to write in order to communicate with her grandmother who had (strangely) returned to their *shtetl* also near Minsk on the eve of the First World War. My mother grew up in a big city whose Jewish population was continually enlarged during and immediately after the war by refugees from semi-rural Galicia, Ukraine, and Lithuania. Jews made up more than 1/3 of the million people who lived in Warsaw in 1914, and already ½ of that Jewish population were, like her parents, recent arrivals from Lithuania. It was a city of immigrants. Knowing that they were about to leave Poland, her parents kept little Frania—or Freydl—out of school in the fall of 1922. I have the diary that she kept in part to ward off the boredom of waiting for the all-important visa.

One day in late November, just a few weeks before their departure, left alone with her little sister and brother, she builds an entire village on the floor of their sitting room, out of blocks, furniture, household objects—a *shtetl*. “By the street lamp there is a small synagogue.”

Surely, you will ask yourself, why am I writing about the town of *Wieza*—or Tower—, when there are other, even more interesting places? Because I built this town on the table out of Naci's building blocks. Other things like mountains, rivers, and so on, I made out of her other toys. This is the first reason why I am writing about *Wieza*. The other reason is that such a town cannot exist for very long, therefore it will last longer on paper.

A few minutes later.

The small town no longer exists. Julek began the work of destroying it. Seeing this, I gathered up the blocks. I knew that it would be like this. It is good, that I made it last, though, on paper. (from “Thoughts Dreams Memories,” November[?] 1922, 31 Gesia Street, Warsaw, pages 5ff)

She seems to understand that everything is dissolving—certainly her own life in Poland along with all that she may have known of the depleted (and for her, unvisited) *shtetl*. What is she to do? The answer of course—then and later, in America—would be to write.

Three weeks later the family left for Cherbourg and America.

Twelve years later she had had as thorough an education as Charleston could offer: Craft School, Memminger, and a major in Latin at the College of Charleston. She sent poems to the *News and Courier*, edited the *College Magazine* where she published plays, poems and stories; graduated, married, moved North and returned to Charleston in the fall of 1935, a freshly initiated adherent of the Popular Front, a largely Communist accommodation of a broad-based leftish agenda that would include what it called Proletarian Literature along with the collection of oral history and folklore, both regional and multi-ethnic. Frances's errand in the South that summer was largely aimed at her family, still installed above their delicatessen on lower King Street. She also had a literary mission. Having just read the novel and seen the dramatic production of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* she had the notion that she might do something in a similar vein for Charleston and the Low Country, if only she had the knowledge that had not come her way between 1922 and 1933 when her trajectory led no farther afield than King Street and the Battery, Folly Beach and Summerville. In the fall of 1935 she made local excursions to phosphate plants and cotton mills in North Charleston along with trips to Edisto and other places on the coast. She hitched along with a commercial traveler who served the Jewish shopkeepers hither and yon, wrote copious letters home to Julius, but also understood that what little she could learn on a series of outings was still too thin for the kind of fiction and reportage she had in mind. She was a southerner—by adoption—who barely knew the South. She tries very hard to render the English that she heard at the phosphate mill and adds that she might have used a translator.

Then one afternoon late in the trip when other resources had failed her, a friend offered a visit to the Frost sisters who had spent the preceding decade trying to spruce up their home on lower King Street—number 27, below Broad, of course—known at that time as The Pringle House. She was certainly well-received that afternoon, given the tour free of charge, but the gentility of old Charleston was the opposite of what she had come to see. In a letter to Julius in St. Paul she lets her imagination trash the place. She conjures up a “horde of vandals going thru and smashing the chandelier and throwing the china and chairs around and the thought sort of pleased me, goodness knows why.”

Oh, darling, darling, in an ancient house with portraits of dead people and beds dead people slept in and rugs dead people walked on, looking at the little dried up old maid and listening to her I'd rather have you sitting on a genuine Spanish reproduction reading your Huge Tome about the Liquor Interests. . . . I wasn't made for such. At one time I might have thought it's because I wasn't to the manner born, but now I know better. Remember darling when I told you that I was sitting in a room nothing in which nothing was more than ten years old? I am in that same room and typing on the same machine.
(fmb to jb 30 october 1935)

In a city that defined itself by its history and its memory, she was obliged to think of herself as a person without an available past.

In a story called “The Pringle House” written upon her return to St. Paul she has a Jewish girl explain to her gentile companion just how little she has to work with, by comparison with the old families of Charleston:

I have no roots whatever. My people were torn up too many times. I don't know where my great grandfather lived. I never saw the place my parents were born. You think I am Polish, but when we were in Poland we were foreigners. My parents came from Russia. I have never known Russia. When I was a child I used to sit up on the balcony of our tenement and watch the soldiers march underneath and the funerals pass on their way to the cemetery down the street with old women wailing and tearing their hair. I'd look through the iron railing and then I'd turn back to my book about lion hunting in Africa. The lions were more familiar than the soldiers and the old women...it's always been like this.

Reading, and then writing, fill the empty space between the past and the present; between the *shtetl* and the city, between Europe and America. Books become that home away from home. They are what one remembers.

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As an outsider, Frances may have overestimated the grip that the natives had on their own, inherited culture. In a collection of her etchings of old Charleston printed in 1945 Elizabeth O'Neill Verner regrets that she did not begin this kind of work until 1923—a few months after my mother's arrival in the city—when, as Verner writes, “so much which to my generation represented Charleston had disappeared.” She certainly would have had to strain her memory to produce so many lovely pictures that peel away all evidence of modern life. No automobiles, indeed, no macadam roads and no power lines. In this she resembles her friend Alice Ravenel Huger Smith who called her own work “memory sketches,” which permitted her to observe a rural scene, sketch it in pencil, and then paint from memory in her Charleston studio. In fact, the result reaches well beyond personal memory. Her finest watercolors, collected in a book called *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties* (1936), illustrate her father's memoirs of his pre-Civil War youth. Smith was born in 1876. Susan Pringle Frost, whose sister was Frances's guide that afternoon at the Pringle House, oversaw the restoration of a stretch of Tradd Street “back to where it was for so many years *before my knowledge*.”

I want to suggest that much of the cult of the Old South, for those who stayed put and for those who carried their ideals northward, defy memory. Various southern artists and writers, bent on the maintenance or renewal of what they take to be the Old South, borrow or invent the memories of another generation. Once again, we occupy the world of—and here I borrow the title of Allen Tate's only novel—*The Fathers* (1938). It should have been embarrassing—

apparently Tate wasn't embarrassed—to learn that much of the antebellum migration of the central family in the novel was lifted verbatim from a 19th-century memoir written by his wife's uncle who recorded the life of his own predecessor, an obscure Baptist minister named Reuben Ross (See Underwood, 198). Nonetheless, Tate's novel records the story that he—and most of his fellow Agrarians—wanted to tell: “the breakdown of the aristocratic system, under the pressure of industrialism, and the breakup of the religious unity of the family,” to quote the original publicity for the novel (Underwood, 197).

Now let me get back to Minneapolis and the charming little academic ghetto known then (and now) as Dinkytown where by 1939 my parents ran a shop called Bookhunters. My father died, as I have said, in November 1945; *The Old Country* came out in June 1946; it spent much of that summer on the *New York Times* bestseller list along with the work of one of their customers: *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren, then a professor of English at the University of Minnesota where he was joined a year later by Allen Tate. Now I don't want to claim that Warren can have remembered nothing of his subject, the Kingfisher, Huey Long of Louisiana; Warren had spent much of the 1930s there when he wasn't in Memphis, where he became a colleague of Tate on the faculty at Southwestern College. He remembered Baton Rouge.

Both Tate and Warren were among the twelve southern writers who had contributed essays to that great document of southern recalcitrance called *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Most of the contributors celebrate and recommend a return to agrarian life, some with a fairly benign approach to the pillar of that system—slavery. The two freshly minted Minnesotans were joined at the University of Minnesota by another southerner, Henry Nash Smith of Texas, their sometime friend and critic, analyst of various myths of the South and West, most notably in a book called *Virgin Land* in 1950. Smith had edited *The Southwestern Review*, originally centered in Dallas and Baton Rouge, until the more bluntly Agrarian wing broke off and started the *Southern Review* at Louisiana State. That break may have been hastened by a piece of polite demolition published in 1934 by Smith in the *Southwestern* as “The Dilemma of Agrarianism” that begins as an analysis of *I'll Take My Stand* in which he describes the feigned history represented in that book as mythology—most notable for its imitation of the ancient Golden Age—and then trashes what appear to be their prescriptions for the contemporary South. Cleanth Brooks and Warren initiated the *Southern Review* a year later.

These men were all customers in my parents' shop, none of them close friends, but when my mother took a degree in librarianship at the University in the early '50s she took a graduate seminar with Henry Smith. She wrote her final paper on Mark Twain and Sholom Aleichem which Smith remembered in a letter (to me) 50 years later as his introduction to the Yiddish writer. She compares the literary *shtetl* of Sholom Aleichem with the Mississippi River towns of the American writer. Smith liked it. She got an A.

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The catastrophic history of the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe and America would generate numerous migrations which would appear to have little in common with each other. But I want to suggest that they may follow patterns of demolition, dispersion, and reconstruction that yield a common structure and permit, often in subterranean ways, one to borrow from another. I do not think that my mother shed the habit of loss and literary reproduction that she learned in Warsaw when she came to Charleston where, among other reproductions, dialect stories were the name of the game. Both of my parents adored *Porgy*, and, as everybody knows, Dubose Heyward would be joined by a few Jewish gents in the making of the opera in 1934. (The Gershwins won that right from Al Jolson who had seen himself as Porgy several years earlier, but that's another story.) Crown's publication of *The Old Country* in 1946 was immediately preceded by B. A. Botkin's *Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions of the People* (1944) and followed by Nathan Ausubel's *Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (1948). Botkin, a Jew from Boston, was living in New York when he was transplanted—reluctantly at first—to an academic job in Norman, Oklahoma, where in the 1920s he began the collections known as *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*. By 1930 he had joined Henry Smith on the editorial board of *The Southwest Review*. Later, in hindsight, he would declare that “his participation in the regionalist movement stemmed in part from his roots in rich Jewish traditions and folkways: ‘My adaptability and my devotion to the “cause” are part of my heritage ’” (Dorman, 43-44). Though much of this transfer of allegiances among various regional and ethnic cultures owes much to the program of the Popular Front in the 1930s—that would include Smith and Botkin and my parents, but exclude Tate, Warren, and most of their friends—I want to suggest links that defy a political agenda, right or left. Millions of people, bereft of memory, borrow what they need from each other. They make do.

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