Many of the thinkers who shaped American Judaism in its most formative period—roughly, the middle third of the twentieth century—were raised in the rapidly shifting landscape of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Both Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983) and Jacob Agus (1911–1986) were born in a town located today in Poland or Lithuania, but controlled by the Russian Empire at the time of their birth. Examining their biographies in a comparative manner offers a useful approach to a larger question: How much emphasis ought the scholar of American Jewish thought place on the East European background of the thinker she wishes to study? Of course, this question is embedded in an even broader historiographical question: How do American Jewish historians approach East European Jewry?

1 Methodological Considerations

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, historians of East European Jewry were forced to rely almost exclusively on published essays and printed materials, including autobiographies, memoirs, and recollections gleaned from oral history interviews. Thanks in particular to the opening of local and state archives in formerly communist countries since 1991, scholars now enjoy a greater level of access to a wider variety of sources, so the study of East European Jewry has only grown in sophistication and nuance. Introducing a recent multi-volume history of the Jews of Poland, Antony Polonsky explains that what Jewish collective memory recalls of this experience is well established, “But with the opening of the archives in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe and the vast amount of research which has taken place in the last two decades in

* It is an honor to pay tribute to Bob Seltzer, whose vigor inspired me while I was writing my dissertation and whose encouragement helped me complete it. Bob’s scholarly reputation preceded him because his research interests align so closely with my own: the Americanization of the Jews, East European Jewish history, Modern Judaism, intellectual history and historiography. Therefore, it is only fitting that the subject of the present essay sits at the crossroads of these fields and not surprising that Bob’s name appears in the footnotes.
Israel, North America, and Europe, there is a need to produce a new synthetic account which will correct the overly sentimental and also the exclusively negative view of the past, both of which are prevalent.\textsuperscript{1} Historians no longer need to wade through literary and impressionistic works to gain greater access to the facts on the ground, and they are better able to present Jewish life in Eastern Europe historically with less interference from Jewish memory of that experience.\textsuperscript{2}

While it is crucial to resist the urge to romanticize the experience of East European Jewry, Steven Zipperstein has shown that collective memory can and even should co-mingle with historical inquiry. He argues that despite historians’ better efforts an “aseptic” approach to the study of the Jews of Eastern Europe will miss the mark no less than the collective memory of that experience will remain resistant to historical fact. The drive to commemorate, counter-intuitively, can provide great access to historical reality.\textsuperscript{3} So for example, while historians do well use to them cautiously, the memorial books \textit{[yizkor bikher]} compiled by former residents of the various Jewish communities destroyed during World War II and the early efforts of historians to chronicle the histories of these places provide us with usable source material where it is otherwise lacking. The need for caution springs from the fact that this historical scholarship and the memorial books both tend to emphasize the prominence of political movements such as Zionism and the Jewish Socialist Bund because more often than not the authors and compilers of these works were driven by these very same ideologies.\textsuperscript{4}

In light of the above, what are the potential pitfalls of writing twentieth century American Jewish intellectual biography? First, the intellectual biographer must be careful not to present his or her subject’s early life as one

\begin{itemize}
  \item[2] Yosef Hayim Yerushalm most famously posited a stark contrast between modern Jewish historiography and Jewish “memory” in \textit{Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), ch. 4.
  \item[3] Steven Zipperstein, \textit{Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999). As Zipperstein himself notes (6–8), his more nuanced approach to the question of “history” and “memory” was largely inspired by his own teacher Amos Funkenstein’s approach to these questions and critique of Yerushalmi’s work. See Amos Funkenstein, \textit{Perceptions of Jewish History} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 10–21.
\end{itemize}