

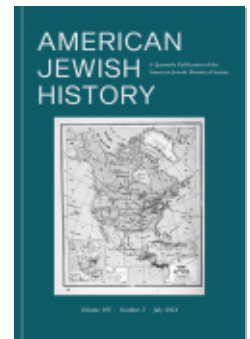


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Parkchester: A Bronx Tale of Race and Ethnicity by Jeffrey
S. Gurock (review)

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Goldman locates the difference between conservative and liberal Jews between seeing the 1967 War as a “liberation” versus “occupation.” He seems to wish for a non-violent Israeli past without questioning whether such a past was possible in an ethnonational state. He recalls, “The Palestinians in the camps, many of whom were refugees from Israel, could only be called an occupied people. They surely were not a liberated people, as some naïve Americans were given to portraying them” (114). Who gets to be naïve? Goldman’s focus on the arts, celebrity, and structural similarities between the United States and Israel could show more emphatically that such naivete was deliberate on the part of Israel, Israelis, and Jews if compared to other state strategies. Turning to his personal memory, he stops short of demonstrating that the naivete that he names and the innocence of Israel in film and celebrity endorsement enabled the violence he witnessed.

In part a history of why Jewish American politics on Israel moved further right in the twentieth century and the role of the Bible in the new, enduring images of Palestine/Israel, *Starstruck in the Promised Land* positions Zionist liberals as naïve and shocked when they cut through the nationalist propaganda on which they had been raised to see some disturbing truths about Palestinian life under occupation. Goldman presents multiculturalism, especially in his discussion of Sinatra, as a potential response to racism while also narrating the failure of multiculturalism to enfranchise Palestinians. Perhaps because of his own embrace of the possibilities philosemitism offered him as a Jewish American, Goldman is frequently uncritical of violence toward Jews and others embedded in philosemitism as much as in antisemitism. This would be one way to evaluate the implications of Israel’s turn toward non-Jewish celebrities/celebrity as a means for upbuilding the state’s image.

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Parkchester: A Bronx Tale of Race and Ethnicity. By Jeffrey S. Gurock. New York: New York University Press, 2019. ix + 308 pp.

How do you pay tribute to an eighty-year-old enclave that gave you some of the best memories of your life, yet was a bastion of racism for much of its existence? That is the dilemma faced by Jeffrey S. Gurock

in *Parkchester: A Bronx Tale of Race and Ethnicity*. Written with affection and acuity, the book is a balanced insider's account of the vast and visionary planned community in which he grew up. More broadly, it is a teeming microhistory of the struggle for fair housing in New York City.

Opened in 1940 and still home to twenty-five thousand people, Parkchester was the dreamchild of Metropolitan Life Insurance Company president Frederick H. Ecker, who sought a safe, socially beneficial, tax-abated investment for his company's unshakable profits. The scale of the project still staggers the imagination. The world's largest apartment development, Parkchester contains 12,271 units in 171 buildings grouped in four clover-shaped quadrants over 129 bucolic acres in the East Bronx.

As befitting a model community conceived by an underwriter, Parkchester featured fireproof construction, childproof windows, and anti-slip treads in the stairwells. It boasted all the modern conveniences except air conditioning, the absence of which fostered an open-door conviviality during the summer and later served as a unifying source of discontent. The grounds included a welcoming oval and fountain and enough playgrounds and ballfields to keep any resident from pining for the suburbs. New schools, churches, synagogues, and the first branch Macy's soon appeared. Less appealing were the regulations regarding bikes, sleds, prams, dogs, and flower-picking. Repeated violations, even by children, could lead to eviction. Rules were enforced by uniformed patrolmen that some tenants disparaged as the "Parkchester *Gestapo*" (79). Yet the guards provided welcome security against the many youth gangs that rumbled for turf in the borough.

For years, the most successful Parkchester applicants were white ethnics from the lower middle class—civil servants, garment workers, salespeople, and small business owners. These children of Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants developed a "special get-along spirit," in contrast to the ethnic animosities formed a generation earlier in the crowded tenement wards (11). Evidence of Parkchester's "back-fence friendliness" could be found in its forty social and athletic groups, two newspapers, and symphony orchestra (50).

Not just a product of Gurock's warm memories, this Bronx tale is spun from archival records, newspaper reports, and oral history interviews that shed light on the "egregious blot" on Parkchester's record, namely the discriminatory vetting process that excluded Blacks and Latinos for thirty years (2). This injustice—and its hard-won correction—form the moral core of the book. It lays bare the insidious web of lies that underlay racial exclusion at Parkchester and Met Life's other Manhattan housing projects. First, there was the lie that "Negroes expressed no interest in living there" (99). Then came the lament that integration would jeop-

ardize the company's investment, violate its fiduciary responsibility, and lower property values and tax revenue. To implement this policy under a veil of impartiality, management developed an application process that identified people of moderate but steady incomes and certifiably good character, with a preference for the relatives of tenants. One phase entailed a personal interview by a Parkchester "social worker" (31). Here we see the utility of code words in policing the color line. Those deemed "decent and quiet folk" came to define "the Parkchester type" (31, 117).

The earliest challenges to Met Life's brand of racial capitalism occurred in the 1950s when activists mounted a petition and publicity drive. The campaign escalated when a tenant sublet her apartment to an African American family in 1952. The company took legal action, which sparked responses from the Bronx NAACP and Urban League. A court declared the sublet unlawful and had the family evicted, leading to a sit-in at Met Life's downtown headquarters.

Where did the white ethnics of Parkchester stand on the question of discrimination? Most kept quiet, even those who remembered when antisemitism hindered their own dreams of domestic betterment. Gurock suggests that their acquiescence exposed the limits of Parkchester's famed neighborliness. "We lived separately together," explained one resident (125). Gurock also cites the deep-seated tradition of segregation in New York, where, until 1968, courts upheld racism as a property right, letting landlords rent to whomever they pleased.

It was also in 1968 that Met Life sold Parkchester to the Helmsley-Spear group for a record \$90 million. Harry and Leona Helmsley put in new wiring, raised rents, diddled security deposits, and pushed an unpopular condo conversion scheme. They continued Met Life's vetting system but welcomed Black and Puerto Rican condo buyers who sought escape from the upsurge of crime and arson that made the Bronx a symbol of urban blight in the 1970s. Aging Jews and their upwardly mobile children left Parkchester in droves, but they did not flee their black and brown neighbors, insists Gurock. Conditions worsened until the non-profit Community Preservation Corporation acquired the property in 1998, negotiated shared costs with residents, and renovated top to bottom.

Today, Parkchester is one of the most diverse communities in New York. The children of Bangladeshis, Malaysians, and Ghanaians gather in its playgrounds. These new residents have developed their own get-along spirit and close-knit ethnic and religious ties. Synagogues have been repurposed as mosques and Hindu temples. Catholic churches and schools now serve African, Caribbean, and Latino worshippers and students.

Gurock's fluid style, crisp narrative, and sound judgments make the book eminently readable and teachable. Maps and illustrations heighten appreciation of the enclave's evolution from construction site to multicultural mecca. Most impressive is his handling of the dilemma presented by his personal connections to the place. It is a problem faced by all historians who are implicated in the shame of a beloved community. Gurock's response, so laudably realized in *Parkchester*, is to acknowledge its errors, extract its lessons, and celebrate its capacity for change.

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The Kosher Capones: A History of Chicago's Jewish Gangsters. By Joe Kraus. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. vii + 225 pp.

Toward the end of *The Kosher Capones*, Joe Kraus admits what may be on the mind of many who first pick up this book—that this book and the idea of a Jewish gangster is a set up for a joke. It aligns with the spate of comedies that portray the Jewish gangster as somehow having taken a wrong turn and ended up running a tough-minded, unforgiving criminal enterprise. As Kraus says, Jewish gangsters are often “more the stuff of comedy than anything to be taken seriously” (159). Not far into the narrative, however, we are led down a path of cold-blooded murders, tough Jews, sluggers, and intimidation. We are given insight into the twentieth-century Jewish organized crime history of Chicago, which though not as robust as its Italian counterpart, nevertheless includes a cohort of Jewish bosses who were able to maintain a presence in organized crime for over sixty years. Kraus smoothly pulls together the strands of these different Jewish characters and events for the first time. As such, *The Kosher Capones* provides an important, readable, and integrated discussion of this largely hidden component of organized crime in Chicago. A comprehensive understanding of the success, longevity, and ethnic character of organized crime in Chicago—and Capone's Chicago Outfit in particular—is substantively advanced by Kraus's historical research and lively stories of the Jewish experiences.

Kraus's book is aptly titled. In more or less serial fashion we are presented with the various leaders or “Capones” of the Jewish criminal enterprises. He begins with Bennie Zuckerman's efforts to pull together