UCLPRESS

Jewish Historical Studies
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Review:

Professor Berman: The Last Lecture of Minnesota's Greatest Public Historian

Mara W. Cohen Ioannides[1,*]

How to cite: Cohen Ioannides, M.W. ' *Professor Berman: The Last Lecture of Minnesota's Greatest Public Historian*'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 52(*1*), pp. 310-311. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.025.

Published: 03 June 2021

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard editorial peer review.

Copyright:

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: Maraionannides@MissouriState.edu
[1]Missouri State University, USA

https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.025

Professor Berman: The Last Lecture of Minnesota's Greatest Public Historian, Hy Berman with Jay Weiner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-51790-106-6, pp. xvi + 179, $24.95.

Professor Berman: The Last Lecture of Minnesota's Greatest Public Historian is the result of a collaboration between Hy Berman, who died in 2016 aged ninety-one, and Jay Weiner, a journalist who, when he approached Berman, discovered that he was not the first to request a memoir from this important Minnesotan. Berman wanted the memoir to read as though he was telling the story himself, and it does. His personality as a historian and storyteller shines through, giving readers the sense that they are engaging in a conversation with Berman.

Berman credits his secular Jewish immigrant parents, who were Communists, with turning him into a historian. They sent him to Communist-run Yiddish after-school classes and camps, and insisted he excel at a public school. After three semesters studying chemistry at City College, Berman was drafted to fight in the Second World War. Because he had taken German in college and spoke Yiddish, he was recruited as a translator until the need for surgery forced him to change roles. He was then sent to work in a Boeing factory to uncover a suspected German spy ring. After the war, Berman finished college, though not as a chemist. He graduated in history, completed his Ph.D. at Columbia University, and initially taught at City College. In 1951, Berman broke with the Communist Party after hearing about the Soviet regime's anti-Jewish campaign. He himself encountered discrimination in the academy, both as a Jew and because of his research interest in labour activism. Lecturing in East Berlin in 1987, Berman experienced the Communism his parents had espoused fifty years earlier at close quarters, which only reinforced his conviction that he had been right to leave the movement. As Berman readily admits, his stance on the conflicts emerging between Jews and African Americans and his evaluation of the Israel-Palestine problem made many Jews uncomfortable, and his relationship with the Jewish community was strained.

Berman and his family arrived at the University of Minnesota in 1961. They quickly settled in, although the transfer from the world they knew in New York and Detroit, where menial jobs were done by people of colour, to Minneapolis, where there were hardly any people of colour (or Jews, for that matter), was something of an eye-opener. Even so, Berman was

part of the ground-breaking Iron Range project, and negotiated with black students to create the Black Studies program at the university, where he also collaborated with Herbert Humphry, who taught there following his tenure as Vice President of the United States.

The book focuses as much on Berman's record of public service as it does on his academic track record. When Rudy Perpich ran for governor of Minnesota in 1976, Berman served as his "Official Historian". The title was essentially meaningless, but Berman did work closely with Perpich on the campaign, and eventually wrote his first inauguration speech. In 1981, Berman travelled to China, following an invitation from the authorities to help modernize the way American history was being taught at the country's universities, which was essentially frozen in time. Apparently, he was considered trustworthy because of his father's former longstanding association with the Communist Party of the USA. Money was no object, and he spent five months in China, instructing faculty and Party officials. In 2002, his university awarded him an Outstanding Community Service Award in recognition of his service as Minnesota's premier historian, which for him was one of the highlights of his career.

Even so, there are some significant aspects missing from this book. While Berman frequently mentions his Jewishness, and it is clearly important to him, he never explains what it actually meant to him, nor does he have anything to say about the Jews of Minnesota or anything specific about his interaction with other Jews. We never find out whether he joined a synagogue, for example. He mentions that his wife, who was a Holocaust survivor, influenced his decisions, but beyond that she plays no role in his narrative. It surely goes without saying that he would have been unable to pursue either his academic career or the various forms of public service he mentions without her looking after him and taking care of their children (who do not feature either). This oblivion to the impact of his personal circumstances on his public life seems rather troubling. These criticisms notwithstanding, this is a fascinating book, not least given the insights it affords into the ways in which historians work, and, given its conversational style, it makes for a breezy read.

Mara W. Cohen Ioannides