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Rachel Cockerell, *Melting Point: Family, Memory, and the Search for a Promised Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025), 401 pp.

Between 1907 and 1914, the Galveston Movement, orchestrated by New York financier Jacob Schiff, redirected nearly ten thousand Russian Jewish immigrants to the Texas Gulf Coast and dispersed them to communities throughout the West and Midwest. In *Melting Point*, English writer Rachel Cockerell describes her discovery of the movement, which carries a unique charge: Cockerell's great-grandfather David Jochelmann was one of its leaders. Directing the Kyiv branch of the transnational effort, Jochelmann was responsible for recruiting potential emigrants and selecting candidates for the Galveston-bound ships. Cockerell's search for her ancestor and his reasons for moving his family to London after World War I uncovered his involvement in a plan she had never heard of to send Russian Jews to a place she had never heard of.

Due to the dearth of documentation by or about him, Jochelmann remains "the almost silent figure at the heart of *Melting Point*" (5), but it is shaped around him. The first part (roughly half the book) details the background of the immigration movement he helped direct; the second focuses on the interwar experiences of Jochelmann's son Emmanuel, who relocated to New York and became a successful if forgotten playwright in the avant-garde theater; and the third chronicles Jochelmann's move to London and the subsequent generations of his family there.

It is unfortunate that Cockerell was not able to find more detail on Jochelmann's Galveston Movement activities, which would have been a welcome addition to the record, but in viewing the movement from a European rather than American perspective, *Melting Point* makes an important contribution. As Cockerell demonstrates, a project that Schiff and his American managers understood to be purely pragmatic—as

pogroms worsened, Russian Jews could find immediate safety only in America—was for their European partners embedded in ideology. Cockerell turns up connections between her family history, the Galveston Movement, and the tumultuous politics of early Zionism, including leaders like Theodor Herzl, Vladimir Jabotinsky, and Israel Zangwill.

In Jochelmann's near-absence, Zangwill, his Galveston Movement colleague and an English playwright, is *Melting Point's* central figure; Cockerell's title puns on Zangwill's best-known play. "I had certainly never heard of Israel Zangwill," Cockerell writes, "[once] the most famous Jewish figure in the English-speaking world, but I soon began to understand his significance—both to the early twentieth century and to my family" (4). It was Zangwill who enlisted Cockerell's great-grandfather into Schiff's project and who enticed him years later to move to the United Kingdom, where his descendants, including Cockerell, still live.

Cockerell is at her best depicting Zangwill's tireless (and, in hindsight, absurd) attempt to secure a site for a Jewish homeland *anywhere except* Palestine. As founder of the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO), Zangwill responded to Herzl's call for a sovereign state in the Jews' ancestral home by supporting the concept but rejecting the location. "The principal difficulty," an ITO supporter explained, "is that Palestine is already the homeland of another people" (324). At various times Zangwill tried to secure land for a Jewish state in East Africa, Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), Mesopotamia, Australia, Canada, Mexico, and Paraguay; every proposal collapsed, usually quickly.

Zangwill's frustration with the ITO's repeated failures led him to partner with the Galveston Movement, even though its goals contradicted his; Schiff was an avowed anti-Zionist and opponent of every plan for Jewish statehood. "The promised land of the Jew," Schiff wrote, "is America," and rather than seeking a land of their own, immigrant Jews should "become part of the bone and sinew of our great country" (115, 109). Schiff's goal was to make America accessible to as many Jewish immigrants as possible and to disperse them broadly, preventing the massing populations that could create ghettos—or homelands. Zangwill agreed to support the plan Schiff proposed as "something immediately practicable" (115), but his ambivalence ran deep. "America

is the euthanasia of the Jew and Judaism," he said. "If I had my way, not a single Russian Jew should enter America" (126). Zangwill is the best-drawn figure in *Melting Point*, a true *schlemiel* who comes across as equal parts zeal and haplessness, genius and futility, and he deserves the detailed attention he receives.

The most conspicuous feature of *Melting Point* is its peculiar narrative method. With the exception of Cockerell's brief preface and afterword (totaling eleven pages), the entirety of the book is comprised of direct quotes taken from published primary documents, selected and arranged into a narrative, with each source cited briefly in the margin. This approach, Cockerell explains, allows her sources to "reinforce each other, bristle against each other, converse with each other, and come together to build a story" (1). Not only is there no narrator, but there are no explanatory notes, archival or secondary sources; no thesis, argument, interpretation, contextualization—only quotes. "I began to notice my irritation at my own interjections," Cockerell says, "and found myself reaching to delete them" (1).

But without a narrator, major figures—Chaim Weizmann, Cyrus Sulzberger, Max Nordau—are mentioned or quoted but never identified. No one restrains racist and colonialist speakers who disparage Kenyans as "savages" and "barbarians" who "are well disposed to white men" and "admit [British] superiority" (70–71). No one intercedes to clarify confusing quotations, as when Winston Churchill lavishes praise on "Mr. Chamberlain," which seems odd until it is revealed that Churchill was speaking not of his rival, Neville Chamberlain, but of his father, cabinet minister Joseph Chamberlain (51). Without a narrator, every source seems equally important, as when the assessment of the potential for a Jewish state by Weizmann, the future Israeli president, is placed right beside another from the Jersey City *News* (15).

The problem is that historical sources do not speak for themselves, and they never mean only what they say. They require context, explanation, and often correction, or they are likely to be misunderstood. Even *Melting Point*'s publisher seems to have come away with a crucial misconception of the Galveston Movement, billing the book as "the story of a long-lost plan to create a Jewish state in Texas." It is not. There was never any such plan, and no one in the book credibly says

there was; the Galveston Movement was actually a plan to *prevent* a Jewish state. Perhaps the confusion arises from the mistaken newspaper coverage Cockerell quotes without saying it was mistaken: "A colony will be established near Galveston"; "Zangwill's ITO is colonizing the Southwestern United States" (124, 133). Fortunately, Cockerell gives Zangwill an opportunity to rebut: "There is not the faintest idea of establishing a colony in Texas," he insists (124). But how is a reader to know which account is correct? These contradictory statements do not reflect different opinions—Zangwill's claim is verifiably true, and the newspaper reports are verifiably false—but they are presented side by side without explanation as equally plausible. Recent media coverage of *Melting Point*, including a *New Yorker* piece titled "When Jews Sought the Promised Land in Texas," suggests that without authorial guidance, readers are already drawing the wrong conclusions.

Melting Point is entertaining to read and informative about personalities, recovers important and overlooked subjects, and some readers may appreciate Cockerell's stated goal of reproducing the quality of memory, "elastic, shifting, filled with small details" (1). But it is an anthology of unmediated opinion, and most historians will be frustrated by Cockerell's decision not to assess the veracity of her sources, draw conclusions, or correct known errors. Maybe a book like *Melting Point* is perfect for our post-truth age, when everyone has a take, every take is equally valid, and opinions are more compelling than facts.

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