

AN AMERICAN JEWISH VACATION PATTERN:
THE ACCOMMODATION OF CONJUGAL TENSIONS*

Leonard Plotnicov
University of Pittsburgh

In a previous article (Plotnicov 1968) I addressed myself to the issue of role changes among the members of American Jewish families as a consequence of migration from Eastern Europe. Particularly, that paper focussed on the structural weaknesses within the conjugal relationship and the potentiality for the generation of strains within the husband-wife situation. However, if that argument was logical it is still contradicted by a most embarrassing fact; the population described has an exceptionally low rate of divorce and separation (Seligman and Antonovsky 1958:61, 92). Assuming the validity of my analysis it then becomes necessary to carry the examination further and to ask why spouses remain together when there are strong forces pushing them apart.

Many explanations can be offered to account for marital stability in this population. Granting this, the present paper will not attempt a survey of eufunctional factors. Rather, it will describe only one such element that, to my knowledge, has not previously received attention in this regard. It is a pattern of summer vacation behavior, associated with American Jews which, I suggest, is a cultural means of relieving the pressure of tensions that is built up between husband and wife.¹

It is no mere coincidence that the Jewish summer vacation pattern, with the development of resorts specially catering to Jews, had its beginnings around the turn of the century and coincided with the initial attainment of middle-class status by Eastern European Jews in the United States. Although Jews from other parts of Europe had been present in the United States in moderate numbers since the eighteenth century, and had frequently risen to high position, their general behavior followed that of gentiles and they did not develop summer vacation resorts. The Eastern European Jews had been in the United States for roughly a generation before

Jewish resorts began to appear on a large scale (Baltzell 1958:281-282; Boroff 1958:57; Gordon 1949:222ff.; Rosenberg 1954:206-207; Seely, Sim and Loosley 1956:78-80; Weinryb 1958:20; Wirth 1928:268-269). The example of vacationing used here is that of the Catskill Mountains of New York State. It is the one I am most familiar with, but the features I shall deal with are common for Jewish resorts elsewhere in the United States. Boroff succinctly describes the setting:

A region of high meadows and woodland.... Today the term "The Catskills" means pre-eminently a vast playground for hundreds of thousands of New York City Jews....

Actually the vacation area--known variously as "the Borscht circuit," "the mountains" (although in this section of the region they rarely exceed 2,000 feet)...consists of 1,000 square miles of green and pleasant countryside about 100 miles from New York City. Here almost 500 hotels and 2,000 bungalow colonies...have sprung up. And here, during the summer, more than 2,000,000 souls swarm over the hills and valleys. The 40,000 permanent residents--farmers and shopkeepers--now make their living largely from the summer business (1958:56).

During the summer the normal Jewish community is divided: the women and children at the resorts and the men in the city. Except for weekends, the women at the resorts far outnumber the men and, significantly, the men present tend to have less social importance than the women residents. Except for the husbands--whose visits are limited to weekends and their period of vacation leave--these men are either employed to perform services, or are non-wage earners (temporarily without a job and accepting unemployment compensation), or old men who may be invalid or sick, and the older boys, regarded as immature males. The summer Jewish community is largely a women's community--it is they who form the important links in the summer community's social network. The choice of the place of the summer residence also rests with them.

The vacation may last as long as ten weeks, or even longer for some residents. Vacationists live in bungalows, in small apartments (actually single rooms with kitchen privileges), or at a hotel where board is included in the rates. Once the family summer household has been set up, the routine is the same from day to day except for the heightened

activity on the weekends when "most men come careening up on Friday evening and take part in the enervating crawl homeward on Sunday night. Meanwhile their wives have purchased a summer of total leisure.... The mothers are free to resume a camaraderie-of-the-girls that they have abandoned in adolescence.... The women sit around together in a kind of all-day coffee break" (Boroff 1958:62).

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the men might look forward to the summer release from their wives, but even if they view the break as a release, there is no doubt they are also lonely. Philandering, however, seems not to be common. The week in the city is spent watching television, or sitting in conversation with other men in front of their houses, in parks, or over tea at a cafeteria. If some men anticipate relief from their wives, the very thought of such improper behavior might well serve to heighten the guilt feelings they harbor.²

I know of no sociological research in this area, so I am forced to seek corroboration for my observations and interpretations from writings in fiction. The following quote is from an autobiographical account of Philip Roth in which he writes of his boyhood experience at a New Jersey seaside resort not far from New York City:

Usually he [father] took off the last week in July and the first in August; otherwise he would stay in the city during the week and drive down on weekends. Sometimes [he would come in the middle of the week when]...the city was too hot. "You can't even breathe," he tells my mother. "The humidity," she'd say.

On these surprise visits he would usually arrive about seven-thirty without having had dinner....

All my ideas of how difficult it was to be a man, to work and support a family, seem to me to have come, not so much from being told about the difficulties, as from observing the kinds of relaxation the difficulties let you into: as for work, it made you want to pour a handful of cool water on your face and neck, it made such a simple thing a pleasure.... I had no clear idea...of what he did. What did he do during the day? And when we were away what did he do at night? Who did he listen to the radio with? He missed us--I was sure of that--and though he would never indulge his loneliness, it must have pleased him when the day's temperature and humidity became so

unbearable that he felt justified in fleeing the city for the night [my italics]. He paid, most of the time, however, in money and in loneliness for our comfort. The heat in the summer was the enemy of women and children--we had to be saved from it (1959:47-48).

The end of this quote alludes to one of the more important cultural rationales that serves to support the family's removal to the country during the hot summer months: health. The city, where the husband remains, is considered an unhealthy place as well as an extremely uncomfortable place during the summer. The least a man can or should do is to preserve the health of his family. The family's summer vacation holds a position of foremost priority in the allocation of the Jewish family budget. By providing for his family's vacation a man also demonstrates his ability to fulfill one of his roles as father and husband--the obligation to give his wife and children a comfortable standard of living. But the cost of a family's summer vacation is no small sum. I have estimated that a man may spend between 10 and 20 per cent of his annual income to provide his family with a summer vacation. This estimate is based on interviews conducted during the summer of 1959 when I was told that, depending on the lavishness of accommodations, length of stay, number of persons in the family, number of weekend visits, and so on, vacation costs ranged from a minimum of six hundred dollars to "over four thousand." One cannot entirely rely on these figures, for in many cases there was the deliberate attempt to impress me with inflated annual incomes and summer expenditures. Nonetheless, the cost cannot be slight.

There are costs other than monetary that accrue during the ten weeks to three months when husband is separated from wife and children. It is realized by all participants that the Jewish husband-fathers make personal sacrifices during the summer for their families. It is they who must live and work in the hot, humid, and "unhealthy" city so that their wives and children may have the ease, comfort, and "health" of the country. The husbands must, in addition to their normal routine of work, perform those tasks for which they ordinarily depend on their wives--cooking, housekeeping, etc. They are also deprived of emotional support from their

wives, and they miss their children. This situation exists even for those families who go to the seashore rather than to the country. These seaside places are rarely more than an hour away by public transportation from the family's place of residence in the city, and yet the pattern of vacationing is similar: the husband remains in the city while his wife and children live by the shore.

During the summer vacation, Jewish women are in a position of power not so clearly manifest during the remainder of the year. Even more significant, with regard to the primary concern of this paper, is the cathartic suffering and purging that men undergo each summer. I have heard some men complain in a self-pitying way about their difficulties during the summer, particularly stressing the household chores and their loneliness, as though these tribulations were a form of self-exoneration or expiation for any residues of guilt, and the complaints themselves a necessary part of the process of public atonement.

For the many reasons given, a man is anxious to be with his family in the country. Ideally he will visit them each weekend. His wife will also urge him to come, not only because it is proper for her to do so, but also because the strong emotional ties that do exist between them come to the surface during the periods of their separation. The high points of the family's summer are the weekly weekend reunions when the family members play out their roles as if following a culturally normative script. They bring to their social interaction an almost stylized behavior that emphasizes the salient features of their values and the points of strain in the family system. The following is a generalized account of what takes place.

The husband's weekend migration to the vacation resort follows a regular pattern. He leaves the city immediately after work on Friday without pausing to rest or eat, despite the knowledge that under heavy traffic conditions his arrival will be considerably delayed. Prior to the opening of the New York State Thruway and connecting super-highways to the Catskill area, such trips could take from four to six hours and even longer

They now usually take about three hours. The man generally returns to the city on Sunday evening or early Monday morning. His arrival in the country on Friday night is marked by a quasi-ritualized behavior pattern, the composite acts of which carry great symbolic importance to the participants. As each husband arrives, his wife meets him and greets him with a kiss. (Jewish couples otherwise rarely display demonstrations of affection in public.) The wife will have taken pains to make herself attractive and has prepared a substantial and inviting meal. The children will run to meet their father, one of them taking pride in carrying his overnight bag, and the couple follow arm-in-arm with the wife bringing her husband to the waiting supper. These acts clearly signify what are regarded as the proper and good things in life, how the family members should behave and feel toward one another. The good meal has a special significance, for among Jews it does not merely indicate good relations; it especially connotes love, particularly mother's love. In the context of the Jewish family, when food is heartily accepted, it signifies the acceptance and reciprocation of this love. In the stylized behavior of the summer Friday night, the evening meal also signifies that the wife has accepted her husband as the man with whom she has cast her fate and that she has no regrets.

The little domestic drama that is played out underscores the temporary resolution of the couple's marital difficulties. It is apparent in the wife's display of concern for her husband's welfare, by her enquiries about all the possible things that could have troubled him during the week in the city or on the trip up to the country--frustrations in his work, illness, weather conditions in the city, heavy traffic on the road to the resort, etc. She will also tell him how much the children have missed him and will hint she is sexually available to him. Of course, there are individual variations in such behavior, but the broad outlines of this pattern remain the same for most couples.

The effect of this drama is to recapitulate for the husband all his summer deprivations, yet the wife's show of concern helps to bridge the gulfs created between them in the course of their married life together.

The effects of marital erosion are momentarily overcome. The wife's recognition of her husband's discomfort during the summer, as compared with her own ease, not only permits her a harmless release of hostile and aggressive impulses toward her husband, it also permits a similar catharsis for her husband. He, believing that he has suffered and sacrificed himself for his family, can now feel relieved of his own anxieties regarding his adequacy, and his wife's demonstration of affection and acceptance on these Friday night reunions helps further to free him of any feelings of guilt.

The length of time involved in the separation of husband and wife--almost a quarter of the year--must in itself provide a respite from the tensions engendered in Jewish marital life. In addition, the periodic family reunion ceremonies on the summer weekends, although not providing a permanent resolution of marital conflicts, do prevent the overt expression of built-up hostilities that might otherwise eventually result in an intolerable situation. By being periodically discharged through culturally acceptable behaviors, the potentially disruptive strains are rendered ineffectual, and thus the means are provided for the maintenance of conjugal stability.

In presenting this hypothesis several caveats should be raised. The first is that the vacation pattern described is no longer so prevalent among contemporary American Jews, but is a more accurate description of a previous generation. Secondly, even if one could validate the socio-psychological functional relationship between the vacation pattern and conjugal stability--defined as low rates of divorce and separation--there is no way of measuring the relative significance of this method of "catharsis" with other operating factors that achieve the same ends. Additionally, it would be difficult to determine the extent to which the vacation pattern outlined is statistically significant for the population as a whole, that is, what percentage actually behaved this way. What I have described is a statement about culture that is not subject to testing by quantitative measures. But there are ways of qualitatively testing the

hypothesis, and one of these is to examine similar conditions among other groups, which may be ethnic, social class, etc. By the comparative method we could test for the concordance of similar conditions and resultants. That is the final caveat--the comparison has not been made and I hope someone will do it. It is a nice way to spend your field work.

NOTES

* This paper originally formed part of an article that recently appeared in this journal (Plotnicov 1968), and so the acknowledgements of aid expressed there equally apply here. However, not mentioned then was the financial aid given me by the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, enabling me to conduct research during the summer of 1959, in the resort area of New York State described here. Additional data were collected during the summers of 1949 through 1954, when I was employed there.

¹ I was originally stimulated to look into this relationship by a sociology instructor, when I was an undergraduate. When I once told him of the summer vacation pattern I was familiar with, he considered it remarkable that Jewish spouses could, as a result, be separated for periods of almost a quarter of a year.

² I am grateful to George DeVos for pointing this out to me!

REFERENCES

- Baltzell, Edward D.
1958 The development of a Jewish upper class in Philadelphia: 1782-1940. In Marshall Sklare, ed., *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
- Boroff, David
1958 *The Catskills: still having a wonderful time*. Harper's 217: 56-63.
- Gordon, Albert I.
1949 *Jews in Transition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Plotnicov, Leonard
 1968 First and second generation American Jewish families:
 sources of conflicts and tensions. Kroeber Anthropological
 Society Papers 38:11-25.
- Rosenberg, Stuart E.
 1954 The Jewish Community in Rochester, 1843-1925. New York:
 Columbia University Press.
- Roth, Philip
 1959 Recollections from beyond the last rope. Harper's 219:42-48.
- Seely, J. R., R. A. Sim and E. W. Loosley
 1956 Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life.
 New York: Basic Books.
- Seligman, Ben B. and Aaron Antonovsky
 1958 Some aspects of Jewish demography. In Marshall Sklare, ed.,
 The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group. Glencoe,
 Illinois: The Free Press.
- Weinryb, Bernard D.
 1958 Jewish immigration and accommodation to America. In Marshall
 Sklare, ed., The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group.
 Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
- Wirth, Louis
 1928 The Ghetto. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.