Although Michael Gold never mentions the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire in his seminal novel, *Jews Without Money*, the world of that novel is the same world that many of the fire’s victims inhabited-- the tumultuous world of
the Lower East Side. All but unknown and unread today, *Jews Without Money* was among the first novels to depict the teeming center of Eastern European immigrant life in its shadowy heyday. First published in 1930, the novel—a thinly disguised coming-of-age memoir—was a huge best-seller, went through 11 printings and was translated into 15 languages.

Gold, whose real name was Itzok Granich, was primarily a left-wing journalist who, in the words of the critic Morris Dickstein, came early to the American Communist Party and stayed late. *Jews Without Money* is his only novel. That—and the fact that much of his later writing was little more than propaganda—may account for the obscurity into which the book has fallen. But it should not cloud our perception of the stark beauty of that book which, more than anything else I’ve come across, conjures up a Lower East Side of fetid rooms simmering with discontent and rage, a truer picture than almost any of the later sentimentalized depictions of that time and place.

The novel’s narrative voice aspires to the prophetic. *Jews Without Money* is crammed with oracular pronouncements, jagged bursts of action, slashing observations about America, poverty, and the savage streets of the author’s childhood. There is nothing beautiful, charming, heart-warming, or uplifting about the world Gold portrays. Although his striving, broken father and proud, pragmatic mother occasionally veer toward archetypes (or *stereotypes*, depending on your taste), most of the characters—Jewish gangsters and whores, grasping landlords, scheming neighbors, lamenting oldsters, feral youths—are darkly compelling and rarely found in the memoirs of those who escaped from
the immigrant hell of the Lower East Side. Many of the characters do not believe in the American dream; indeed, they yearn for the Old World they have left behind. Many more are contemptuous of the golden calf of American prosperity. *America is so rich and fat because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants*, Gold declaims. A few pages later, meditating on his youthful doubts about religious piety, he muses, *Did God make bedbugs? One steaming hot night I couldn’t sleep for the bedbugs. They have a peculiar nauseating smell of their own; it is the smell of poverty…Bedbugs are what people mean when they say: Poverty. There are enough pleasant superficial liars writing in America. I will write a truthful book of Poverty; I will mention bedbugs…*  

(Of course, even Gold could not have imagined our own world, where the sleek descendants of his characters are re-encountering bedbugs in penthouses and mall outlets. But that is an irony the mordant Gold might well have appreciated.)

If Gold’s narrative voice sounds oddly contemporary, the politics of *Jews Without Money* seem naïve and a little preposterous in 21st Century America. *It is better to be dead in this country than not to have money*, Gold’s father keens. In the final pages, the young Gold, who has yearned earlier for the Messiah to come and liberate his people from poverty’s despair, wanders into Union Square where he hears a fiery socialist sermon:

*O worker’s Revolution, the book concludes, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah…O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle, and to live. O great Beginning!*
A little over-the-top? A little hard to credit in light of the latter half of the 20th Century? Yes. But powerful, evocative, and in its almost mystical wail, Jews Without Money anticipates the hallucinatory denunciations of American culture (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Pynchon, Dylan, et al.) that would bubble up out of the swamp of American popular culture over the next 80 years.

2.

I first encountered Jews Without Money in a place both strangely dissonant and eerily appropriate — my grandmother’s house in Richmond, Virginia. Dissonant because my grandparents were barely literate in English; I never saw either of them reading anything more complex than The Reader’s
Digest. But appropriate because my grandmother, like so many of her
generation of immigrant Jews, spent years of her childhood on Gold’s much-
despised Lower East Side. She arrived at age 14, only 2 years after the Triangle
fire. She sewed lace in a sweatshop, and may well have known some of the girls
who had worked at the Triangle; she may well have known some of the
prototypes for Gold’s characters, all of whom were struggling on those
sweltering streets at around the same time.

“We had 12 people living in 3 rooms,” she once told me. “Back in Russia,
they said the streets of New York were paved with gold. I was 13, I believed it.
Instead, I ended up in a horrible smelly place and I cried every night till I met
your grandfather.”

My grandmother had certainly not read Jews Without Money. She
seemed to be surprised when I found it—covered in dust, with random pages
loose or missing—on one of my rare visits, shortly after my grandfather died.
“One of your grandfather’s socialist buddies must have given it to him,” she
shrugged.

My grandfather, a sweet but somewhat hapless man, was trained to be a
haberdasher but could never find work. “Always, he lost money,” my
grandmother sighed, “always someone did him wrong. He got mad. He got
interested in those crazy socialists.”

He had 5 older brothers spread out across the country. After my
grandmother and grandfather were married (in 1917, on Delancey Street), they
drifted from brother to brother. In Detroit, my grandfather’s brother Daniel
was involved with the labor movement then trying to organize dry cleaning
workers; my grandfather pitched in. To break the union, the bosses apparently
hired the Purple Gang (a legendary bunch of Jewish gangsters who terrorized
Detroit in the 1920s, characters right out of some Midwestern Jews Without
Money, really). One night, my grandfather, who was not otherwise given to
premonitions, rose up from bed in a cold sweat.

“The Purple Gang shot Daniel!” he said (although he probably said it in
Yiddish). “We have to get out of town!”

They did, and eventually wound up in Richmond, Virginia, where my
father, a classic 1st generation American, worked and studied and became a
doctor, and where (several decades later) I was born.

My grandmother did not have a happy adult life but she never looked
back on her Lower East Side youth with anything but relief at having escaped it.
She would have agreed with Gold’s father in Jews Without Money: …This is my
one hope now!…I am a greenhorn but you are an American! You will have it easier than
I; you will have luck in America.

By the time I finally got around to reading—and being entranced by—
Jews Without Money, my grandmother, like most of that world, was already
gone. My father, who wanted no part of those memories, rarely talked about
his impoverished, nomadic childhood (New York, Wilmington, Detroit, Elkhart,
El Paso, back to New York, Richmond). He did once tell me that when he and
his parents landed back in New York, some time in the 1930s, living not so far
from where I now live in NYU housing (my own little luck in America?) most of
his cousins and anyone who could lift himself up, had moved out of the squalor of the Lower East Side.

“There was a saying back then,” he laughed. “You can’t talk to them no more,” he intoned, mimicking my grandfather’s Yiddish accent, “they’ve moved to Canarsie.”

The next wave of post-immigrant life was already underway: the move out of the ugly but vibrant city, out to the rim of that seething cauldron. And then onward to suburbia, the new messiah for the huddled masses who yearned to breathe free.

Or, as Michael Gold might put it, O great Beginning!

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