



The Jew Store: A Family Memoir

By Stella Suberman

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"For a real bargain, while you're making a living, you should make also a life." --Aaron Bronson

In 1920, in small-town America, the ubiquitous dry goods store--suits and coats, shoes and hats, work clothes and school clothes, yard goods and notions--was usually owned by Jews and often referred to as "the Jew store." That's how Stella Suberman's father's store, Bronson's Low-Priced Store, in Concordia, Tennessee, was known locally. The Bronsons were the first Jews to ever live in that tiny town (1920 population: 5,318) of one main street, one bank, one drugstore, one picture show, one feed and seed, one hardware, one barber shop, one beauty parlor, one blacksmith, and many Christian churches. Aaron Bronson moved his family all the way from New York City to that remote corner of northwest Tennessee to prove himself a born salesman--and much more. Told by Aaron's youngest child, *The Jew Store* is that rare thing--an intimate family story that sheds new light on a piece of American history. Here is *One Man's Family* with a twist--a Jew, born into poverty in prerevolutionary Russia and orphaned from birth, finds his way to America, finds a trade, finds a wife, and sets out to find his fortune in a place where Jews are unwelcome. With a novelist's sense of scene, suspense, and above all, characterization, Stella Suberman turns the clock back to a time when rural America was more peaceful but no less prejudiced, when educated liberals were suspect, and when the Klan was threatening to outsiders. In that setting, she brings to life her remarkable father, a man whose own brand of success proves that intelligence, empathy, liberality, and decency can build a home anywhere. *The Jew Store* is a heartwarming--even inspiring--story.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In 1920, two years before the author was born, her family became the first Jews to live in the small town of Concordia, Tenn. Against the objections of his wife, Aaron Bronson, a Russian Jewish immigrant who had worked in dry goods stores in Savannah, Ga., and Nashville, started his own business by opening Bronson's Low-Priced Store in Concordia, which the locals called "the Jew store." In this richly detailed memoir, in which her father's optimism contrasts sharply with her mother's anxiety about their ability to provide their children with a Jewish education in their new surroundings, Suberman evokes early-20th-century life in the rural South and depicts her family's struggles to find a place in a town where African Americans suffered discrimination and poverty, the Ku Klux Klan was on the march and townspeople viewed Jews with suspicion. Suberman provides vivid characterizations of Concordia's residents, especially Brookie Simmons, who not only gave the Bronsons a home but fought to end child labor in the town's factory. In 1933, Aaron finally yielded to his wife's entreaties and moved with her and their three children back to New York City, even though they had come to regard Concordia as home. Author tour.

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From School Library Journal

YA-Russian immigrant Aaron Bronson took his wife and children from their enclave of New York Jews to a tiny Tennessee town where he set himself up as a successful storekeeper in the 1920s. The social, economic, and even spiritual experiences of the Bronson family are recounted by its youngest member, who evidently was a keen listener to family tales as well as an observer of events around her in early childhood. Nearly half of this autobiographical work predates Stella Ruth's birth and even when she appears on the stage, she is no scene-stealer. Her mother had to hide her ethnicity on her jobs in New York, and took years to assimilate to life in Tennessee. Joey and Miriam, the older children, dealt with the blunt questions asked by local children about their Jewishness with aplomb and made good friends. Mr. Bronson had to sell the insular town of Concordia on the idea that a "Jew store," a low-priced dry-goods store, was even needed and, being a "born sal-es-man," he succeeded in selling the idea and the goods as well. Suberman's fine writing and her ability to record tones and scents as well as images make this a lively and engaging story. Anti-Semitism is presented factually, as are the limitations of various townsfolk's penchant for doing good or evil. This will attract casual readers and serve as a useful auxiliary text in classrooms.

Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA

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From Library Journal

After retiring in 1995 as a publicist, Suberman returned for the first time to her birthplace, a small town in northwestern Tennessee. She decided to recount, using fictionalized names and places, her Jewish family's 11 years in that small town, from 1922 to 1933. The author's father, Aaron Bronson, a Jew orphaned from birth in pre-revolutionary Russia, immigrated to New York City. Eventually, he moved his family to rural Tennessee, where he opened up Bronson's Low-Priced Store. Since the Bronsons were the first Jews in town, residents referred to their business as the "Jew Store." Writing with a personal passion (with chapters on "The Bar Mitzvah Question" and "New York Aunts"), Suberman captures the trials her family faced and positive human relationships they formed while trying to adapt to an alien, closed, Southern Christian society. Her interesting, undocumented personal narrative puts a personal face on Ewa Morawska's scholarly social history, *Insecure Prosperity: Small Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940* (Princeton Univ., 1996). Recommended for public and academic libraries. Charles C. Hay, Eastern Kentucky Univ. Archives, Richmond

Users Review

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