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Year 2012

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Assimilation in the Lower East Side
Ghetto of New York City, 1880-1914

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The Immigrant Woman:
Jewish Assimilation in the Lower East Side Ghetto of New York City,
1880-1914

Rachael Siegel
12/14/2012

“The last day of our journey comes vividly to my mind. Everybody was on deck... enraptured by the sight of the harbor and the Statue of Liberty suddenly emerging from the mist. Ah, there she was, the symbol of hope, of freedom, of opportunity! She held her torch high to light the way to the free country, the asylum for the oppressed of all lands. We too... would find a place in the generous heart of America. Our spirits were high, our eyes filled with tears.”¹

The United States was viewed as a beacon of hope for many Eastern European Jews who fled difficult lives. These people had experienced a history of poverty and pogroms in Eastern Europe. They were expelled from cities, their leaders were denied communal authority, and they faced many restrictions regarding occupation and the right to own land and real estate.² The tsarist autocracy, for example, confined its Jewish subjects to the Pale of Settlement,³ and created poverty-stricken communities, called Shtetl, which were easy targets for pogroms and other legal restrictions.⁴ But the immigrants’ transition to life in to New York City was not easy. When these immigrants moved into the safety of the United States, they transplanted the traditions of their own Yiddish culture into the Lower East Side ghetto. For many of these Jewish immigrants, especially Eastern European Jewish women, the United States offered liberation and the

¹ Emma Goldman, *Living my Life* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1931), 11.

² Benjamin Nathans, “The Jews” in *The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume II Imperial Russia, 1689-1917* ed. Dominic Lieven, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 199.

³ First created by Catherine the Great in 1791, the Pale of Settlement was a term given to the only region of tsarist Russia where Jews were legally authorized to settle. The Pale comprised about 20% of the territory of European Russia and reached the borders of Prussia and Austria-Hungry in the west and present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, and Ukraine. The Pale covered an area of about 386,000 square miles and by 1897 contained slightly fewer than 4,900,000 Jews, 94% of the total Jewish population (Nathans, 187-198).

⁴ Lieven, 184.

promise of a new life. That is, if only they could manage to assimilate into the new country.

The Eastern European Jews were the largest group of Jewish immigrants to come to the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, with over two million Russian and East European Jews emigrating between 1880 and 1914.⁵ This period of immigration brought forty-five percent of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States; most lived in New York City, primarily residing in the ghetto of the Lower East Side neighborhood. This ghetto, approximately half of a square mile in area, housed over five hundred forty- thousand Jews, making the Lower East Side the most crowded neighborhood in the city.⁶

Historiography

To what extent could the Jewish immigrant women really become a part of and participate in their American community? The previous historiography of this topic does provide an account of the immigration process and daily lives of immigrant Jewish women. Assimilation is a part of the historiography, however historians focused

⁵ There are several terms used throughout this paper whose meanings are important to understand. The term “Eastern European” refers to the area east of Germany in the geographical context of 1880. Germany is not included in Eastern Europe because the immigration experience of German Jews and other West European Jews was distinctive from Jews east of this region. In addition, “assimilation” is understood to be the process that occurs when people of different backgrounds adapt their lifestyles and ideas to become part of a larger national family. In terms of Jewish immigration, successful assimilation would mean the adoption of American ideals and complete integration into American life. “Ghetto” is understood to mean a part of a city voluntarily occupied by a minority group. Jewish ghettos were a commonly found in large cities on the East Coast. Finally, “Jewess” is understood to be a Jewish woman or girl. While this term is presently considered offensive, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this term was widely used in a non-offensive manner, with Jewesses often referring to themselves as such.

⁶ Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*, trans. Thomas Dublin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), x.

primarily on the assimilative resources that were available. This study seeks to further expand upon the existing historiography by providing a closer look at the resources available to aid in the assimilation of immigrant Jewish women.

The history of the Eastern European Jewry's emigration and assimilation into American society was a popular subject in the late twentieth century. In 1976, Irving Howe published *World of Our Fathers*. Howe documents the lives of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Rather than argue a claim, Howe presents an irreplaceable social and cultural history of the immigrant experience in the Lower East Side of New York. He uses memoir literature in both English and Yiddish, the Yiddish press, American newspapers, journals, historical studies, a range of personal interviews, and some works of fiction to illustrate the lives of the Jewish immigrants.

The World of Our Mothers by Sydney Stahl Weinberg provides an excellent complement to Howe's scholarship. Like Howe, Weinberg follows the lives of the immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe to the Lower East Side focusing specifically on Jewish women's daily lives, a subject central to the purpose of this paper. Weinberg draws primarily from the oral histories of Jewish women who were born in Eastern Europe and emigrated between 1896 and 1925. The secondary source literature, autobiographies, and archival material accompany these oral histories further strengthening Weinberg's study.

Like Weinberg's work, this paper relies heavily on the autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish women who emigrated from Eastern Europe, including Jewish women who settled in the Lower East Side ghetto. It also draws from *The American Jewess*, a magazine published in the Lower East Side and written specifically for women. That the

autobiographies relate similar experiences from a variety of women indicates that they are therefore representative of the larger population of Jewish woman in the Lower East Side.

Trends begin to emerge in the economic position of Eastern European Jewish families. Women played a large role in their Eastern European homes, earning money, managing finances, and raising families. Their central function continued into their new life, but the American world that women entered into was different from their old traditions, with a new set of moral and cultural values that came from their new country. These values greatly affected single women and married women, albeit differently. Through a comparison of life in the Shtetl with life in the Lower East Side ghetto, one can see that married women had to completely redefine their role, whereas single women only had to make an adjustment to the lives they already knew. Single and married women faced different challenges and obstacles but experienced similar results; though single women were given more opportunities than married women, neither group of women could fully assimilate into American society. **The nature of the ghetto, changing economic roles, limited educational opportunities, employment, and entertainment created many obstacles that prevented assimilation for the Eastern European Jewish immigrant women, resulting in an insular culture and an emulation of American life rather than assimilation into it.**

Married Women and Family Economics

The Lower East Side ghetto itself proved to be a strong obstacle of assimilation into American society. Upon arriving, “most families settled in the midst of other Eastern

European Jews, and so the language in the streets and the food in the shops were familiar.”⁷ Familiarity provided security for immigrants, but the Jewish immigrant neighborhoods were removed from the world of the gentile Americans. Jewish communities established their own religious and benevolent organizations, and they ran their own newspapers, cafes, restaurants, theaters, and businesses. Jewesses especially “were by thought, habit, education and inclination still clinging to the customs of the land of their birth.”⁸ As the Lower East Side developed into a replication of their neighborhoods in Eastern Europe, this reduced the immigrants’ need to adapt to a new society and culture. A self-contained community evolved that limited assimilation, changed the family structure and gender roles, and had a large impact on Jewish immigrant women.

Traditionally, Eastern European Jewish women were encouraged to contribute to family finances. Even though life in the Shtetl was characterized by a constant struggle for survival, in the traditional Jewish home, religious scholarship was honored above financial wealth. A man’s prestige, authority and position depended on his level of learning. Reflecting on her Russian childhood in Polotzk, Mary Antin recalls men sitting, studying, and disputing Hebrew books from “early dawn till candles were brought in at night, and then as long as the candles lasted. They could not take time for anything else, if they meant to become great scholars.”⁹ Boys were also sent to study religion at least until their confirmation at the age of thirteen, and longer if they proved to have talent and

⁷ Sydney Stall Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 94.

⁸ Rosa Sonneschein, “The American Jewess,” *The American Jewess*, February, 1898, 205.

⁹ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, (New York, NY: The Atlantic Monthly Company, 1912), 31.

ambition. Because Jewish men were preoccupied with academic pursuits, wives were the “breadwinners so that their husbands could devote themselves to study.”¹⁰ The Jewish women considered it a privilege to support religious education and shoulder the burden of economic survival in a variety of ways.

Many Jewish women worked in artisan shops, made cigars, cigarettes, stockings, other various consumer goods, or worked in a family business. Unmarried daughters assisted in these monetary responsibilities, for “a girl’s real schoolroom was her mother’s kitchen...and while her hands were busy, her mother instructed her in the laws regulating a pious Jewish household and in the conduct proper for a Jewish wife.”¹¹ Daughters assisted in the workshops and businesses of their parents, helped their mothers with domestic and child-rearing tasks, and were generally expected to share in the process of earning a living.¹² One benefit to assuming this heavy economic burden was that women were granted status as quasi-independent brokers in the public world of the market place.¹³ As a result, women played a role as a part of the larger Shtetl community, providing them with a sense of independence and community involvement and had a place within the public domain.

Immigration to the United States brought a change in the economic responsibilities of Jewish immigrants. The process of immigration required men to play an active role in providing monetary support for the family. The newfound professions of men were a necessity. The cost of getting to the United States was high and many Jews

¹⁰ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, (New York, NY: Irving Howe, 1976), 8.

¹¹ Antin, 34.

¹² Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 16.

¹³ Glenn, 8.

were forced to sell possessions to meet the expense. This made it difficult for families to emigrate together. Most common was the emigration of the male head-of-household followed by his family later, when finances permitted their passage into the United States.¹⁴ Because the cost of immigration was so high, these men arrived in New York nearly penniless. Their new occupation was a means through which they could save enough money to send steamship tickets for the rest of their family. This could take several years. In her autobiography, Marie Ganz, a teenager who emigrated from Galicia, noted that her father “had established [their] home, [the] first in the New World, through God knows how much toil and worry and self-sacrifice. It took him two years to do it...before his little hoard of savings had grown large enough to...send tickets to his family in Galicia.”¹⁵ During the time between the husband’s immigration and the eventual arrival of their family, it is possible that men adapted to their new responsibility and no longer felt the desire or need to return to their traditional role.

Or perhaps men were no longer afforded the time to pursue piety because they worked in factories, as peddlers, business owners, or tailors. A young girl from tsarist Russia, who immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve, noticed the change in her father. Instead of seeing him in “his black long tailed coat in which he left home...[and] his same full grown beard and earlocks,” she saw “a young man with a closely cut beard and no sign of earlocks,” a significant change from his recognition as

¹⁴ Howe, 39.

¹⁵ Marie Ganz, *Rebels: Into Anarchy- and out Again*, (Millwood, NY: Dood, Mead, and Company, 1919), 2.

the most pious Jew in the Shtetl.¹⁶ Her father worked as a tailor, leaving “in the morning [when] it was still dark, and [returning] home at night the lights in the halls were out.”¹⁷

As a result of the men’s new responsibilities, the married immigrant woman’s role also changed when they emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States. In the Shtetl, married women held various occupations to earn money for the household, but they were unable to do so in the ghetto. For married women, the primary focus in their new environment was raising children and maintaining the home. They were not to “lift [their] mental vision above the horizon of the nursery and the kitchen.”¹⁸ While women’s economic participation was acknowledged as an important part of life in the Old World, immigrants began to think of it as a source of embarrassment. Women were no longer encouraged to find employment outside of the home because men were expected to work. Only dire economic circumstances, such as those caused by illness, death, a husband’s desertion, or underage children, pushed immigrant wives into employment.¹⁹ Not only was women’s employment discouraged and looked down upon, the presence of women in the work force implied the insecure position of the family.

The new economic responsibility of women, or lack thereof, held wider social implications. The husband’s new occupation limited the married women to the domestic domain and held larger repercussions for their ability to assimilate into American life. As one young immigrant girl recalled, her “mother stayed in the house...So how could she adjust to life in the United States? Everything was new to her and there was nobody to

¹⁶ Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 69.

¹⁷ Cohen, 74.

¹⁸ Rev. Dr. Henry Berkowitz, “Woman’s Part in the Drama of Life,” *The American Jewess*, May, 1895, 63.

¹⁹ Glenn, 66.

show her anything.”²⁰ The relegation to the private sphere meant women did not have the same independence that was present in their traditional occupations and their new occupation did not grant women the chance to assimilate. There was little need for them to be a part of the broader immigrant community, so they were less likely to venture out into American society.

Unlike single women, married women were unlikely to explore the ghetto. They did not belong to clubs or go to dance halls, common activities in the ghetto and American society. Instead, these women belonged to *landsfroyen*, mutual aid societies that helped create a sense of community with people of similar backgrounds. English was “to many of the older Jewish women, still a foreign tongue, and American modes [were] either underrated or above their comprehension.”²¹ Speaking Yiddish, the women were able to take comfort in their native language, but there was no sense of urgency to learn English and involve themselves in American culture and society. The older Jewesses remained insular, relying on other immigrants with similar traditions and struggles to comfort them in their new lives in the United States. These married immigrant women, “lacking the necessary elements of culture could not...altogether obliterate inherited tendencies.”²² The *landsfroyen* provided a reassuring environment because they were made up of people who were like-minded and who often came from the same town.²³ The result of the *landsfroyen* was social insularity and an obstacle of assimilation.

²⁰ Kim Cherin, “In My Mother’s House,” (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), quoted in Kathie Friedman Kasaba, *Memories of Migration: Gender, Ethnicity, and Work in the Lives of Jewish and Italian Women in New York, 1870-1924*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 132.

²¹ Sonneschein, 206.

²² Sonneschein, 206.

²³ Weinberg, 101.

The comfort of customs from the Old Country hindered assimilation of the married Jewish women in other ways as well. Already discouraged by the economic status and relegation to the private sphere, the difficulty of the married women's assimilation was furthered by holding on to traditions from the Old Country. Many women were reluctant or had no desire to assimilate. Married women generally sought to preserve their culture and religion, and only made the effort because of a husband's insistence or a child's embarrassment at her foreign ways.²⁴ Rose Cohen observed that her mother, who arrived several months after herself and over a year after her husband, was dressed traditionally and did not fit into her new society. She tried to help her mother by persuading "her to leave off her kerchief" so she would look "younger and more up to date" but was met with fierce reluctance.²⁵ Children often tried to help their parents in the process of assimilation. It was through their insistence that some of the old traditions were replaced with customs of the new culture, such as the removal of the women's headscarf, but this was not completely successful. Children, busy with their own duties within the Jewish immigrant family, had only a superficial effect on the assimilation of their parents, because assimilation required active pursuit.

Education

Education in the language and ways of their new country was a necessary step towards assimilation. Yet, for married women, education was often difficult to acquire. Compared to the Old World, where "economic struggle was so hard as to absorb all [the woman's] energies, leaving no room for another thought...there was relatively little need of education for the Jewish woman...Here [in the United States] there [was] every reason

²⁴ Stahl-Weinberg, 106.

²⁵ Cohen, 152-53.

under the sun why the Jewish woman need[ed] an education.”²⁶ This quote, published in an article in the year 1915, was written near the end of the wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration. Arguing for full women’s education, the article suggests that married women were not pursuing an education. Life in the Shtetl had prevented women from getting an education because of their role as the breadwinner. In the United States, however, there was nothing preventing the access to education because, it was alleged, the domestic role did not require the women’s full energy. Women needed a formal education to learn English and gain skills that would help them assimilate into American society.

In the United States, unlike Russia, public education was free and legal. Prohibitions against Jews attending public school did not exist.²⁷ There appeared to be resources available for Jewish immigrants, especially for the young, single Jewess. In New York, the free public school system made the dream of education seem attainable. Although single Jewish immigrant women had several educational choices to fit their life in the ghetto, none were adequate.

For most of these Jewesses, the public school system appeared to be the best choice for an education. However, before 1898 New York City had no public high schools, and by 1914 the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx, which contained the

²⁶ Katherine Weisman, “Education and the Jewish Woman,” *Di Bostoner Yiddishe Shtime* 3 (August 13, 1915): 6, quoted in Rudolf Glanz, *The Jewish woman in America: Two Female Immigrant Generations 1820-1929* (NY: KTAV publishing house, Inc., 1976), 105.

²⁷ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Education and the Advancement of American Jews* in *American Education and the European Immigrant*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 48.

Lower East Side ghetto, had a combined total of only five public high schools.²⁸ In addition, the arrival of more than seven million immigrants to the United States between 1899 and 1914 resulted in “overcrowded classes, part-time education, and frequent turning away of children for whom the schools had no place.”²⁹ Overcrowding diminished access to education for the immigrant women, rendering them unable to advance with their studies in the public school system.

Evening schools were another alternative resource for education. In 1906, Jews constituted a majority of the 100,000 students enrolled in New York City evening classes; forty percent of the students in night school classes were Jewish immigrant women and two-thirds of these women attended classes specifically to learn English.^{30,31} These classes met five times a week, for three hours each session. The classes were valuable for their emphasis on speaking, writing, and reading English. However, similar to the regular New York public schools, the classes enrolled mostly Jewish students. There was little interaction with Americans, and therefore no way to learn cultural cues. In addition, although registration was high, attendance was erratic, limiting their comprehension and lessening their chance to assimilate.³²

Bureaucratic decisions also contributed to insularity within the educational system. The New York Board of Education decided that special classes for immigrants would be beneficial to their schooling. Extracurricular classes were created to deal with varying English abilities of the immigrant children. These special classes were set up to

²⁸ Dinnerstein, 50.

²⁹ Dinnerstein, 50.

³⁰ Sorin, 105.

³¹ Weinberg, 171.

³² Weinberg, 171.

teach pupils of foreign parentage so as not to humiliate the immigrant children or slow down the American children.³³ The immigrants were placed in a situation with people familiar to them, which, once again, prevented interactions with American students and exposure to American culture. Lack of interaction with native speakers inhibited a sense of urgency to learn English and lessened their ability to assimilate.

The demographics of the student body impeded the assimilation of Jewish women into the United States. Many schools that Jewish immigrant women attended contained a majority Jewish student body, if not a completely Jewish enrollment. The insularity of the educational system was another barrier to assimilation. Although the Jewish immigrants were learning the language of their new country, there was a limited exposure to the American students, so Jewish immigrants were not exposed to the social and cultural habits of the new country while in school. This meant there was less determination to learn English. Immigrants who knew a little English “served as translators for those who a week or two earlier had stepped off the boats.”³⁴ This de facto segregation did not arouse concerted protest among immigrant parents. They saw this segregation as a means of making the first years of settlement somewhat less frightening for their children. Even at school, people, culture, and familiarity surrounded the immigrants.

Single Women and Factories

Although there were several options for the single immigrant Jewess to obtain an education, the financial position of Jewish immigrant families severely limited the number of women who were able to access educational resources. For Jewish women, especially the single Jewess, the lack of financial stability of the Jewish immigrant

³³ Howe, 277.

³⁴ Howe, 274.

families trumped education, creating an obstacle for night school and the impossibility of gaining an education from public schools and special classes. Poverty and the need to earn a living made the hope for (and access to) education little more than an illusion for the vast majority of the single Jewess. Most single Jewesses, in fact, left school for full-time jobs at nine or ten, usually entering garment shops or factories.³⁵ After falling ill and being unable to work, Rose Cohen's father "decided that [her] sister should leave school and take [her] place...She had just learned to read and write a little, and of course she could speak English."³⁶ Only one third of all children entering public school in New York in 1913 advanced as far as the eighth grade and in 1914 the State Factory Investigating Commission found that "75 percent of women working in factories had left school before completing even these few years."³⁷ Long hours at the factories meant there was even less time for an education. For Marie, entering into the factory meant that even "night school was out of the question until [she] could manage to find a job that would not keep [her] so late, for it was nine o'clock before [her] evening meal was over."³⁸ Unfortunately, for the majority of single immigrant Jewish women, economic hardships restricted access to schooling. The long hours in the factories meant that a necessary step towards assimilation, learning English, was extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible for the majority of the single immigrant Jewish women.

In addition, the role of the single immigrant Jewish women within the family presented a further obstacle to assimilation. As mentioned previously, the immigrant Jewish husband wanted his wife to oversee the domestic sphere while he worked to

³⁵ Dinnerstein, 48.

³⁶ Cohen, 194.

³⁷ Weinberg, 170.

³⁸ Ganz, 109.

support the family. Yet the head-of-household was “often unable, with all their exertions, to support the entire household. As a result, the daughters [would be required to]...go out to work to add something...to the general funds.”³⁹ Between 1880 and 1930, an explosion of factory-made goods and services changed the nature of work in the United States. The wave of Jewish immigration coincided with the development of New York City as the leader in the factory industry, and single immigrant Jewish women provided the labor for this new trade, especially in the sewing factories of the ghetto.

The Lower East Side was the most industrialized neighborhood in the city and housed many small garment shops. With a limited knowledge of English, these women were dependent on the apparel industries within the ghetto, and were unable to venture outside of this area to find employment in other parts of New York City. Thus, the garment shops and factories within the ghetto provided the primary employment for the single immigrant women. By 1910, “women made up over 70 percent of the garment industry workforce” and by 1913 over half of these workers were Jewish and “50 percent were under twenty years old.”⁴⁰ The single immigrant Jewesses were critical for the family’s financial stability; their position in garment factories hindered their opportunity to assimilate.

Similar to their role in the Old World, daughters were expected to use their salaries to support their families. In the United States, this required the daughter to leave the home and enter the workforce. Daughters were expected to “respect the economic priorities of the household, and the sealed pay envelope was a new form of an old

³⁹ Glanz, 19.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of the Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1920*, (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 25.

responsibility.”⁴¹ The logic of work was family inspired. The single immigrant Jewish women were placed in what was the traditional role of their mothers in Eastern Europe: she was charged with the task of wage earner for the well being of the family. When the single immigrant women denied their parents, they “den[ied] the ground under [their] feet, the sky over [their] head. [They] become an outlaw, a pariah.”⁴² The young women were unable to become fiscally, socially, and culturally independent because of their role in the home and their place in the workforce, especially the factory.

The working conditions of the factories proved to be a further deterrent of assimilation. After the death of her father when she was seven years old, Marie Ganz “never had time to play; [she] forgot how to play.... [Instead, she had to] work, work, work, from early morning to late at night.”⁴³ The workday was long, often twelve- to fourteen-hours. Working such extensive hours meant there was little time left for anything else.

In addition, due to the social environment of the factories and garment shops, the single immigrant women were not provided the opportunity to assimilate into life in the United States. Regional ties were an important feature of economic life. The Jewesses found work through kinship and community networks; it was not uncommon for the owners to have known the girls’ parents and relatives.⁴⁴ Clothing manufacturer or contractor would make an effort to “seek out workers from his home town in Europe [and] certain shops in the garment trades were populated almost entirely by workers from

⁴¹ Ewen, 104.

⁴² Anzia Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse: My Story*, (New York, NY: Persea Books, 1950), 72.

⁴³ Ganz, 57.

⁴⁴ Glenn, 135.

the same town.”⁴⁵ The social setting of the factory was one of familiarity and was not conducive to assimilation. In fact, the factory was a small-scale version of the ghetto and became its own self-contained community. Workers could communicate in their own language and their work did not prevent religious observances, such as the celebration of the Sabbath and religious holidays.⁴⁶ This meant there was little incentive for the single immigrant women to venture further than the ghetto. Instead, they worked with other Jewish women from the same region, consequently preventing exposure to the society and culture of the United States. How could the women take measures towards assimilation if their lives were commandeered by the conditions of their employment?

Leisure-Time Activities

Even with the long working-hours and the limitations that came with factory conditions, single Jewish immigrant women had an ample social life. Leisure-time organizations were popular within the Lower East Side ghetto, especially women’s clubs. The clubs became “the central meeting places of women in every town” and were furnished with a multitude of programs and activities, occupying leisure time of the girls.⁴⁷ According to the *American Jewess* magazine, these clubs “ha[d] [their] firm foundation in the desire for intellectual food and nurture, in the sympathy with others who have the same cravings and who labor under the same restrictions.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, because the clubs were founded “by some woman, or women, who personally [knew] the

⁴⁵ Gerald Sorin, *The Jewish People in America: A Time for Building – The Third Migration 1880-1920*, (Baltimore, MY: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 55-56.

⁴⁶ Sorin, 74.

⁴⁷ Glanz, 34.

⁴⁸ Nora Oettlinger, “A Plea for Working-Girls’ Clubs,” *The American Jewess*, August, 1896, 589.

girls in a certain neighborhood, or of a certain trade,” the clubs were a microcosm of the culture of the ghetto.⁴⁹ These institutions served to promote interactions among Jewish immigrant youth, and hindered associations with people outside of the ghetto.

The theater was another form of entertainment in the Lower East Side ghetto. The theater boasted an unrivaled position of entertainment in the Lower East Side, with eleven hundred performances before two million patrons at the turn of the century.⁵⁰ The popularity of the theater resulted from the presentation of the characters that faced the same problems as the immigrants. The experience of the Jewish immigrants was dramatized; it provided a collective experience for the entire community.⁵¹ There were “about a hundred theater houses in New York, many of them in the Jewish quarter...hundreds of people wait[ed] in line...Five cents [was] little to pay.”⁵² Combining the Old World culture with American forms of entertainment, dealing with dilemmas of immigration, and the transitional culture of the ghetto, the theater was a reflection of its audience.⁵³ Yiddish, the lingua franca of the East Side, was also language of the theater in the Lower East Side ghetto. While the language and themes of the theater helped the Jewish immigrants feel comfortable in their new community, the theater did not embolden them to work towards assimilating into American society. There was no need to learn English to understand the shows, and Jewish immigrants were not exposed to the American culture through the popular American productions of the time.

⁴⁹ Oettlinger, 592.

⁵⁰ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 133.

⁵¹ Sorin, 99.

⁵² Quoted in Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 159.

⁵³ Sorin, 99.

Similarly, dance halls were an insular form of recreation. Down in “the East side, dancing [was] cheap. Twenty-five cents a couple...and ten cents for the girls.”⁵⁴ For those who did not know how to dance in the American style, special dance instructors were employed.⁵⁵ The East Side ghetto had a number of dance halls that were set up to keep the young Jewish immigrant women from the dangers presented by public dance halls. But the dance halls for the young Jewish immigrant were placed within the ghetto. Once again, the women only had the opportunity to interact with people from a familiar background; these halls deterred the assimilation of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

Thus, the familiarity of life from the Old Country was incorporated into most leisure activities. Socializing was primarily limited to activities within the ghetto, including the theatre, dance halls and clubs. Although there were no Americans present in these forms of entertainment, there was some American culture.

Interestingly, comparable forms of entertainment and employment were easily found in New York City at large. Similar to the amusements found in the Lower East Side ghetto, the gentile population belonged to clubs, attended theater, went to the dance halls and movies.⁵⁶ In fact, these forms of entertainment were established before the arrival of the great wave of Jewish immigrants. Although the date of the formation of the first club is still a matter of some difference of opinion, women’s clubs took tangible

⁵⁴ Belle Israel, “The Way of the Girl,” *Survey* 22, 1909, 494 quoted in Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 209.

⁵⁵ Ewen, 209.

⁵⁶ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986), 13.

shape not far from 1866.⁵⁷ In addition, the clubs were made up of women who, being obliged to add to the wage-earning capacity of the family, went to work in the factories of New York and desired activities for leisure.⁵⁸ Safe within the environment of the ghetto, yet in circumstances similar to the gentile working women, the Jewish immigrants created leisure activities that mirrored those of larger New York City.

External Factors Preventing Assimilation

Although the Jewish ghetto emulated popular American forms of entertainment, the Eastern European Jewish immigrants segregated themselves from American society by creating their own society within the ghetto. The anti-Semitism found in New York City during the time made it difficult for the Jewish immigrants to enter into American life. The extent of anti-Semitism can be seen in the factories. Anzia Yeziarska was the first to apply for a job when the manager emerged from his office and asked, “Are there any Jews here?” ...[He] briefly scan[ned] the girls’ faces [and stated that] ‘If so [there was] no need to stay. No Jewish girls [were] wanted for [that] particular job.’ ”⁵⁹ Employment outside the ghetto would have presented the same harsh conditions of employment within the ghetto, but would have exposed the Jewesses to American life and contributed to the process of assimilation.

Anti-Semitism wasn’t only found in the workplace. Hatred towards the Jewish immigrants was a common occurrence and proved difficult for many to handle. Rose

⁵⁷ Mary I. Wood, *The History of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs*, (Cincinnati, OH: 1912), 22-23.

⁵⁸ Wood, 25.

⁵⁹ Yeziarska, 105.

Cohen's father grimly stated, "They do not like Jews...and one with a long beard has to take his life into his own hands."⁶⁰

Anti-Semitism in the work industry, as well as in other parts of American society, added to the inability of Jewish women's ability to assimilate. Thus, internal factors of life in the ghetto, especially the continuation of Old World traditions, and the external factor of anti-Semitism in New York City prevented assimilation of the Jewish immigrant women. Barred from participation in American society but expressing the desire to access the benefits of American life, the Eastern European immigrant Jews emulated American society in the Lower East Side ghetto, but in a mostly separate environment.

Conclusion

As Rose Cohen reflected, "in America I had lived in practically the same environment which we brought from home. Of course there was a difference in our joys, in our sorrows, in our hardships, for after all this was a different country; but on the whole we were still in our village in Russia."⁶¹ Jewish immigrant women were provided seemingly great opportunity to assimilate into the United States through their immigration, however their chance at assimilation was greatly hindered. The ghetto itself prevented assimilation. Traditions from the old country were transplanted into the Lower East Side ghetto; the ghetto was the new Shtetl, and the Jewish immigrants formed a self-contained community.

To become independent and assimilate, education was a necessity. In Eastern Europe, Jewish scholarship was only available to the men. Upon arriving in the United States, women began to go to school had taken the first step in the New World. But the

⁶⁰ Cohen, 106.

⁶¹ Cohen, 246.

child that was put into the shop remained in the traditional environment with the older women that were held back by the old traditions and held back by illiteracy.⁶²

Unfortunately, for those who did attempt to obtain an education, the school system available to Jewish immigrants was inadequate. Furthermore, the financial stability of many Eastern European immigrants did not afford them the time to gain an education. If was necessary for the Jewish immigrant women to work in factories to support their families. The social and working conditions of the factories, their financial bond to their family, the limited chance to gain an education, and the familiar surrounding of the social scene of the ghetto, made Jewish immigrants, especially Jewish immigrant women, unable to become independent of their families, leave the ghetto and assimilate into American society.

For the first generation of Eastern European Jewish women, assimilation was a Herculean task. The first wave of immigrants was a group looking to find safety for themselves, their religion, and their culture in a new country. Perhaps it would be better to question if the immigrants were able to acculturate, adapt aspects of the culture of the United States while maintaining an independent Jewish identity. There is already evidence of acculturation in the Lower East Side ghetto: the emulation of leisure-time activities, the increasing educational resources, and the attempt of many to pursue an education and gain new knowledge. Attempting to find a balance between religion, traditions, and a life in their new country, they incorporated elements of the New York City lifestyle into their own.

⁶² Cohen, 246.

Perhaps the insularity of the Lower East Side ghetto reserved the tradition of Judaism in the United States. The massive wave of immigration between 1880 and 1914 was a new diaspora. Jews were fleeing from the oppression of Eastern Europe, desperate to find safety for themselves and their religious practices. Upon entering the United States, freedom from religious persecution allowed for a newfound religious expression. For this reason, traditional values were fiercely retained.

Ultimately, it would be the children that would overcome the obstacles of assimilation into the United States. American-born children of the immigrants would grow up learning English, have an awareness of life outside of the ghetto, have access to better resources for education, and be removed from the traditions of the Old Country. Responding to the limitations of the younger, single generation of Jewish immigrant women, women would encourage their children to become a part of American life rather than be held back by the traditions and religion that limited their own mothers. These resources would allow the new generation to rise up and take advantage of resources, despite a continued presence of anti-Semitism.

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