

The *Jewish Daily Forward* editor Abraham Cahan, a key advocate of the clothing trades community, sought to change the cultural conversation about sweatshops as ethnic “housing.” In his essays and stories, sweated sites were seething with ambition, not bugs. Cahan attempts to lift the smirch of the sweatshop by suggesting that this workplace is a roving, expanding, and thoroughly transitional phenomenon. His ethnics are on the move, their moveable workplace filled not with germ-ridden menace but with feisty entrepreneurship.⁵⁶

Several factors, including the rise of ethnic authors, combined by the 1890s to allow the predominantly male ethnic laboring voice to claim narrative authority. The resulting stories, poems, and sketches, often in Yiddish and written largely for fellow workers, reflected the common experience and provided a catharsis of sorts. Translated for American readers, the poems broke through the literary landscapes of sweatshop life produced by newsmen and novelists. The rebuttal in this literature of “scientific,” journalistic, and social scientific presumptions about sweated labor space was neither aimed at nor did it reach the community of social engineers who had developed their reformist expertise. Instead, the sweatshop that began to voice itself personalized the narrative site in so

doing. Like the works of mainstream observers, this literature recognizes the sweated ethnic workspace as a hybrid slum home and factory at the margins of American assimilation. But it does not foreground the stigmatization inherent in the shop experience. In the participant-observer's view, the sweatshop is a living environment, not the literary landscape of hell produced by mainstream observers. Abraham Cahan, a Russian-Jewish immigrant and onetime cigar worker, was a sweatshop success story. His novella *Yekl* displeased community leaders when it appeared in 1896 with its unflattering depictions. Nonetheless, on the strength of his advocacy of Jewish Socialist causes, Cahan went on to edit the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the largest Yiddish-language paper in the nation. Throughout the 1890s and beyond, he was a cultural leader and moral authority in New York's Lower East Side ghetto.⁷⁸

Cahan's tailors in *Yekl* are at a cultural crossroads. His fictional Jewish garment-trades workers respond heartily to assimilation, biculturalism, and the lure of new moralities and popular entertainments. Through them Cahan critiqued the new cultural practices that informed real-life Jewish ambition. In so doing, however, he reshaped the discourse of the "odd ethnic" in ways that none of his contemporaries could have imagined. All of Cahan's garment-shop characters are hard workers, and *Yekl* is no exception. In a rejection of tragic toilers, *Yekl* is determined to become a real "Yankee" by learning English, saving money, and generally moving up. Again, his aspirations are emblematic of enterprise. Many Jews traded a sewing machine or pushcart for a clothing shop or real estate holdings.

Like his sweatshop coworkers, *Yekl*, renaming himself Jake, turns the Lower East Side into a school. He improves his English while attending boxing matches or following betting scores. English is spoken even at the dancing academy where he seeks a more American wife, and he hums popular songs at the machine. In describing Professor Joe Peltner's dance academy, Cahan adds, significantly, that the sweatshop workers learning the new dances look more like they are working than playing. Like the ambitious, diamond-hard Mamie Fein, whom Jake, though married, is courting, he is enticed by clothing and amusement and bent on enjoyment as well as ascension, but Jake also has entrepreneurial ambitions that, with Mamie's savings, he will realize.

Cahan's sweatshop is evolutionary, an ethnic rite of passage. The way in which the workers colonize the shop, infusing it with their own work

culture, suggests Cahan's understanding of the transformative power of workers in even the most oppressive conditions.⁷⁹

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