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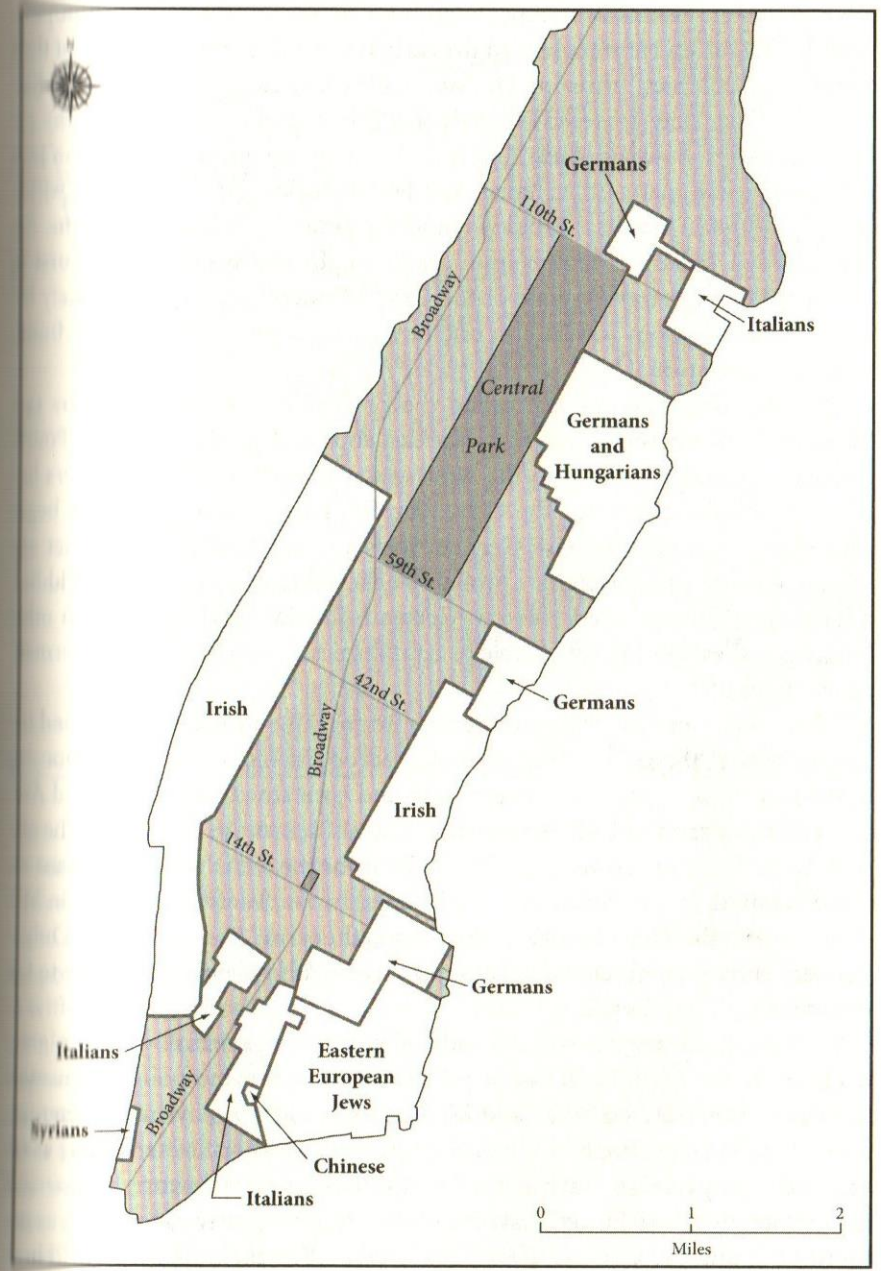
THE LOWER EAST SIDE

IN THE EARLY 1920S, journalist Konrad Bercovici published a series of ar ticles in *Harper's Monthly* on the immigrant "quarters" of New York. One piece profiled the small but well-known Lebanese and Syrian enclave on Washing ton and Greenwich streets south of where the World Trade Center later sat. Another took readers on a guided tour of the neighborhood around St. Mark's Place where, despite their ancient feuds, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and Bul garians all concentrated. Bercovici identified two dozen ethnic enclaves in the city: African (meaning African Americans from the Caribbean), Armenian, Bulgarian, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, French, German, "Gipsy," Greek, Hun garian, Italian, Jewish, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Scandinavian, Scotch, Serb, Slovak, Slovene, and Spanish. Bercovici, an immi grant from Romania who had lived in Paris and Montreal before settling in New York, found the city's mixture of peoples intoxicating. New York, he con cluded, is "not a city, but a world."

There was an apparent rationale to how all these people spread themselves out across the city. As Bercovici noted in 1924:

> A map of Europe superposed upon the map of New York would prove that the different foreign sections of the city live in the same proximity to one another as in Europe: the Spanish near the French, the French near the Germans, the Germans near the Austrians, the Russians and the Rumanians near the Hungarians, and the Greeks behind the Italians. People of western Europe live in the western side of the city. People of eastern Europe live in the eastern side of the city. Northerners live in the northern part of the city and southerners in the southern part. Those who have lived on the other side near the sea or a river have the tendency here to live as near the sea or the river as possible.[1]

SELECT MANHATTAN IMMIGRANT ENCLAVES, 1900



All of these observations were accurate.

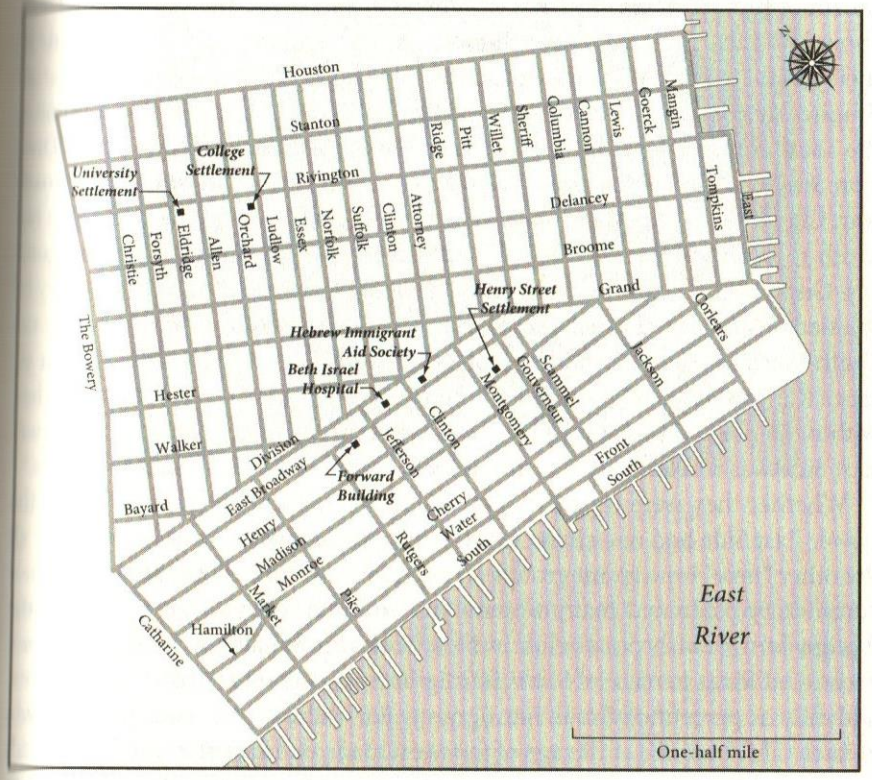
Some of these ethnic quarters were tiny. A few were not really enclaves at all, but concentrations of retailers without a significant foreign-born population. In fact, when New Yorkers in the early twentieth century thought of their immigrant "colonies," three major ones came to mind: the Jewish Lower East Side, the Little Italy centered on Mulberry Street, and Chinatown. By the eve of World War I, however, New York had absorbed so many east European Jews and Italians that many other Italian and Jewish enclaves had developed within the city — first in Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, and later in Queens. But even though Italian or Jewish immigrants might end up in Bensonhurst or Brownsville, on Arthur Avenue or the Grand Concourse, they most likely began their new lives in America in one of the original lower Manhattan immigrant communities.

The area that New Yorkers called the Lower East Side (bounded by 14th Street to the north, the East River to the east and south, and the Bowery, Fourth Avenue, and Market Street to the west) was the same area New Yorkers had called Kleindeutschland in the Civil War era. Eastern European Jews began settling there in part because German Jews already lived in the district and in part because the newcomers probably believed that as speakers of Yiddish, a language that combined Hebrew, German, Russian, and words from other languages, they would best be able to communicate with New York's German-speaking residents.

There was room for these new Jewish immigrants in Kleindeutschland because by 1880, the German immigrants had begun moving to better housing uptown, settling especially between 50th and 59th streets east of Second Avenue and from 72nd to 96th Street from Central Park to the East River. The earliest use of the term "Lower East Side" to describe the area that the Germans vacated is found, appropriately, in a Jewish weekly, *The Jewish Messenger,* in May 1880. By 1888 the *Times* had also begun using the term, albeit sparingly. Only at the very end of the nineteenth century did New Yorkers begin regularly to call the area the Lower East Side.[2]

By then, residents of New York had had years of experience with immigrant enclaves. In Five Points, the adult population had at some points been more than 90 percent foreign-born, and Kleindeutschland — always more heterogeneous than its name implied — had also struck native-born New Yorkers as exotic and utterly foreign. But those neighborhoods seemed downright *American* in comparison to the Lower East Side of the 1890s and early 1900s. It "is as unknown a country as Central Africa," reported the *Herald* in 1892, "a world in itself, . . . one of the most foreign quarters to be found in any city in the world." Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant, was even more blunt about what he discovered

THE CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN PORTIONS OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE, 1910



when he crossed to the east side of the Bowery around the same time: "There is no mistaking it: we are in Jewtown."[3]

Comprising more than 250 square blocks, the Lower East Side was far too big to be called a neighborhood; it was really a series of neighborhoods. Contemporaries believed that the Lower East Side's Jews chose where in the district to settle on the basis of their European origins. "The different groups form separate colonies, the boundaries of which are easily distinguishable," wrote immigrant-turned-social worker David Blaustein. "The Hungarians occupy the territory between Avenue B and the East River almost to the exclusion of all other Jews; the Galicians [southern Poles] are found east of Suffolk street; the Roumanians in the territory enclosed by Houston street, Suffolk street, Grand street and the Bowery, and the Russians south of Grand street as far as Monroe street." Scholars have made the same assertions ever since.[4]

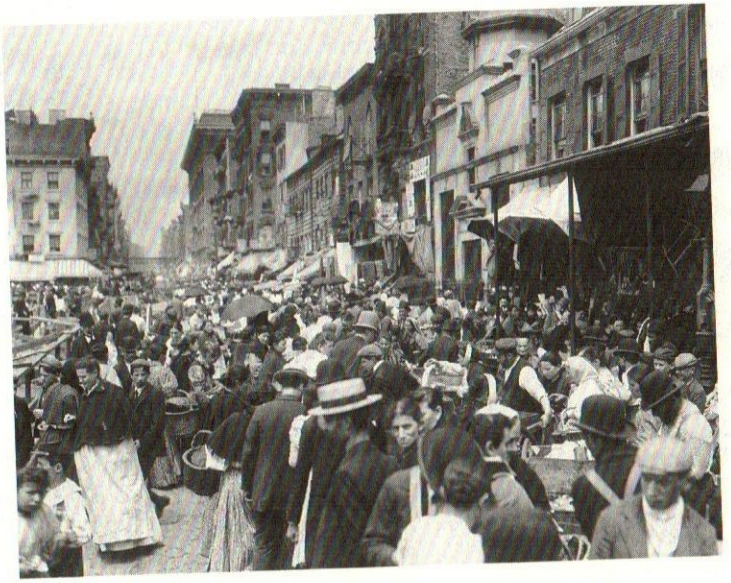
Yet New York's Jews did not really organize themselves so uniformly. There were only enough Romanian Jews in New York to allow them to dominate a

couple of blocks, not the thirty-five Blaustein described. And while it is true that Hungarians did congregate in the northeast portion of the Lower East Side (north of Broome Street and east of Attorney as of 1900), they constituted only about half the inhabitants of each block, and that many only if we include in their numbers the Polish Jews from areas controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By contrast, Blaustein's contention that Russian-born Jews dominated the southernmost portion of the Lower East Side is accurate. South of Division Street in the old Seventh Ward near the waterfront, most of East Broadway, Cherry, Monroe, Madison, and Henry streets, as well as the roads that ran south to the waterfront such as Pike, Rutgers, Jefferson, Clinton, Montgomery, Gouverneur, Scammel, and Jackson, were populated almost exclusively by Russian Jews. They also accounted for three-quarters of the population in the Tenth Ward south of Grand between the Bowery and Norfolk Street. Even so, more Russian Jews actually lived in the remainder of the Lower East Side than within the portion designated by Blaustein as their "colony." Most of the Lower East Side was a heterogeneous mixture of Jews from all over eastern Europe.[5]

Whether they were from Pinsk or Minsk, Plotzk or Polotsk, the Jews of the Lower East Side had one characteristic that distinguished them from nearly all the other "new" immigrant groups arriving in New York at the same time: their community contained many women and children. In 1920, 48 percent of the foreign-born Jewish population in New York was female. In contrast, women accounted for 41 percent of Slavic immigrants, 35 percent of Italian immigrants, and only 21 percent of Greek immigrants. For children, the contrast was even greater. Children under the age of fourteen made up one-quarter of the Jewish immigration in this period but only one-ninth of the immigration from other sources.[6]

Jewish migration was a family affair. As a result, the Lower East Side became extraordinarily crowded. "The supreme sensation of the East Side is the sensation of its astounding populousness," wrote an English visitor in 1912. "The architecture seemed to sweat humanity at every window and door." In comparison to these heaving tenement blocks, a "crowded . . . uptown thoroughfare . . . is an uninhabited desert!" Abraham Cahan found the Lower East Side so teeming with humanity that daily life there was a veritable "battle for breath . . . It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth — a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centres of Europe."[7]

By 1895, fifteen years before the Lower East Side reached its peak population, the portion just south of Houston Street between Clinton and Columbia already housed more than eight hundred inhabitants per acre, making it the most densely populated place on earth. The district to the southwest



The "astounding populousness" of the Lower East Side: Hester Street looking west from Norfolk Street, 1898.

(bounded by the Bowery on the west, Rivington to the north, Norfolk to the east, and Division to the south) housed 626 inhabitants per acre, increasing to 728 by 1905. But because the Lower East Side contained some uninhabited lots dedicated to commercial activity, the population density of the area's residential blocks was actually much higher. In 1900, more than one hundred Lower East Side blocks held over 750 persons per acre — and nearly fifty held more than 900 per acre. The most crowded zones were the twenty or so square blocks from Henry Street to Cherry between Catharine and Jackson, dominated by Russian Jews, and the sixty or so square blocks between Delancey and Houston from the Bowery to the East River, populated by a mixture of east European Jews. Thirty blocks in these two zones contained more than one thousand inhabitants per acre. The most densely populated of these as of 1900, bounded by Delancey, Goerck, Rivington, and Mangin, housed 1,756 per acre.

Not every block was so crowded. The population density of the entire Lower East Side in 1910 was about 625 persons per acre. Even so, that meant that the Lower East Side's 1.35 square miles had more inhabitants in 1900 than the 444,000 square miles of Wyoming, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico combined. Put in modern perspective, the Lower East Side of 1910 was more than three times as densely populated as New York's most crowded neighborhood today (Manhattan's Upper East Side), even though the predominant five-story tenements of 1910 were only a fraction of the height of today's residential tow-

A family of seven in a two-room barracks-style tenement apartment, ca. 1910. The front room (in which the family is posed) served as kitchen, dining room, living room, and at night as the bedroom for the kids. The parents would have slept in the back room, the "sleeping closet." The window between the kitchen and the sleeping closet was not original but would have been added around 1879 after a new law mandated that every inhabited room have a window.

ers. None of the most congested neighborhoods in the world today — in Dhaka, Nairobi, and Mumbai — are as densely populated as were the most crowded neighborhoods of the Lower East Side in the decade before World War I.[8]

The tenements those immigrants inhabited were not primarily the same structures that the district's German and Irish immigrants had called home back in the 1850s and 1860s. In those days, New York's immigrants had lived primarily in two types of tenements — two- to three-story wooden buildings that had been converted from single-family dwellings, and four- to five-story brick buildings that usually measured twenty-five by fifty feet and had four two-room apartments per floor.

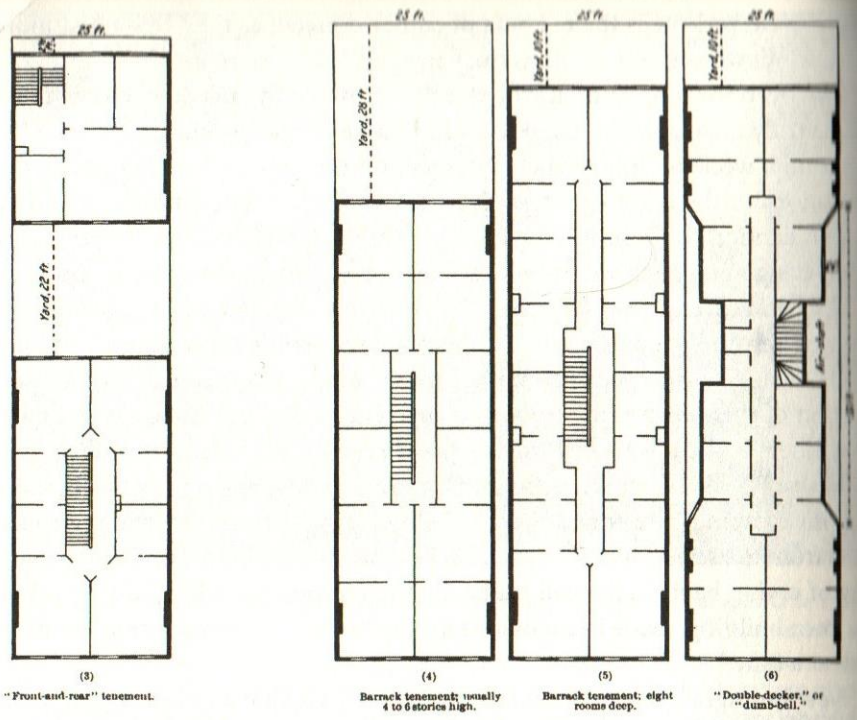
By the time Italians and east European Jews began arriving in large numbers at the end of the nineteenth century, the wooden tenements had almost all disappeared. Although several thousand of the city's antebellum brick tenements, sometimes referred to as "barracks," were still in use in 1900, two new tenement designs were now favored by developers. The first increased the footprint of the barracks-style tenement to cover 80 or 90 percent of the lot. These buildings struck New Yorkers as the epitome of landlord greed, as they contained dark, windowless interior rooms than any previous design.

The overcrowding and lack of ventilation made life inside barracks tenements truly miserable. In 1894 Pulitzer hired investigative journalist Nellie Bly to spend a weekend in one such tenement on the Lower East Side. Bly found conditions in the building, at 223 East 2nd Street between Avenues B and C, nearly identical to those chronicled by reporters in Five Points forty years earlier — dangerous pitch-black hallways and stairwells, unbearable noise, "vile stench," and stifling heat. "Oh, the smell of it!" Bly exclaimed upon opening the door of her third-floor apartment. "It seemed to me that more than a million kinds of smell rushed out to embrace me in strong, if unseen, arms." A good portion of the stench came from the tenement inhabitants themselves. Lower East Siders bathed just a few times a year because only 8 percent of them had bathtubs. Bly also discovered that with 3,500 people living on her block, there was no escaping "the constant sound of voices which rose in one unbroken buzz from the street," all day and all night. That noise, plus the endless cacophony of crying babies, stairwell traffic, and other loud sounds produced inside her own building, made it impossible for Bly to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time.[9]

New immigrants moved around the Lower East Side a lot, each year seeking a slightly better apartment or a marginally more affordable rent. In the first eight years that he appears in the New York City directory, for example, my great-great-grandfather Isidor Munstuk lived in the rear barracks-style tenement at 103 Hester Street, then at 115 Delancey, 25 Orchard, 144 East Broadway, 407 Grand, 165 Clinton, and 385 Grand.[10]

While lot-sized barracks-style tenements may have been the worst dwellings in New York, there were at most several hundred of them in Manhattan in 1900. By far the most common type of new tenement built after the Civil War was the "dumbbell tenement," typically referred to as the "double-decker." It was created in response to complaints about the lack of light and fresh air in the inner rooms of the barracks-style buildings. In December 1878 a building trades magazine called *The Plumber and Sanitary Engineer* announced a $500 reward for the best new design for a tenement on a twenty-five-by-one-hundred-foot lot that would provide fresh air and light to every room. The magazine received more than two hundred entries and displayed them all in an exhibit that accompanied the contest. The magazine's jury selected as the winner architect James E. Ware's "dumbbell" design.

Ware's winning entry, which called for a building that was as wide as the lot in the front and the back but narrower in the middle, vaguely resembled a weightlifter's dumbbell. The narrow part of the tenement, set back eighteen



The evolution of the New York tenement: On the left at the bottom, the typical twenty-five-by-fifty-foot brick tenement and above it a twenty-five-by-twenty-five-foot rear tenement. These were the typical tenements built in the years before the Civil War. In the middle, two "barracks-style" tenements with three and four rooms per apartment, but very dark interior rooms. On the far right, the "dumbbell" or "double-decker" tenement with four-room apartments in the front of the building and three-room apartments in the rear. Most dumbbell tenements had three-room apartments front and rear, leaving more room in the backyard for the outhouses and hydrants.

inches to three feet from the property line, had windows that admitted a bit of light and air into interior rooms via an airshaft. If a barracks-style tenement sat next door, however, these airshaft windows would face the solid brick wall of the neighboring building. The press dubbed these buildings "double-deckers," because the floor plan looked like one house stacked upon another.[11]

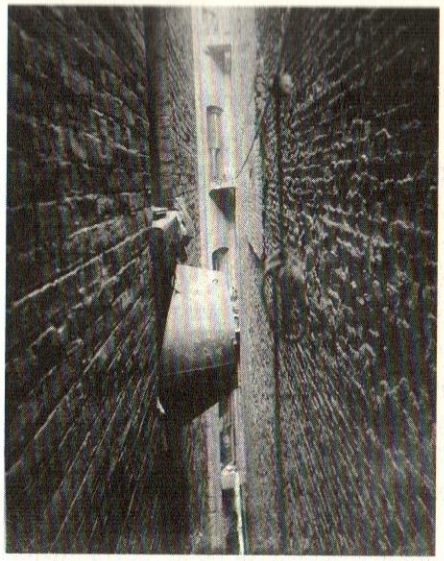
Observers recognized that the dumbbell design was only a modest improvement. Referring to Ware's plan as well as those of the runners-up, the *Times* lamented that "if the prize plans are the best offered — which we can hardly believe — they simply demonstrate that the problem is insoluble . . . If one of our crowded wards were built up after any one of these three prize designs, the evils of our present tenement-house system would be increased ten-fold." Nonetheless, Ware's floor plan became the standard Manhattan tenement design in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. Thousands of them, "great prison-like structures of brick, with narrow doors and windows, cramped passages and steep rickety stairs," were built throughout the city. As a congressional committee noted in 1901, it was New York's "Hebrew district," the Lower East Side, that was "preeminently the region of the double-decker."[12]

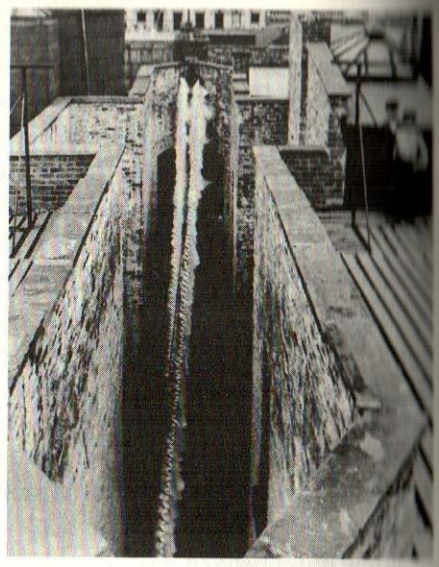
Though one might imagine that the bigger three-room apartments in the double-deckers would have held more immigrants than the Lower East Side's remaining two-room barracks apartments, that was not always the case. Relatively well-to-do immigrants who could afford more space often leased the larger apartments, even if they did not have very big families. The oldest buildings with the smallest, cheapest apartments thus often had the most inhabitants. Journalist Jacob Riis reported that a two-room apartment on Essex Street was once found to house twenty inhabitants — a mother and father, their twelve children, and six boarders.[13]

Some dumbbell tenements were incredibly crowded. In 1900, one of my paternal great-grandfathers, mattress stuffer Mendel Dandishensky (who, after his arrival in 1896, "Americanized" his name to Max Dandeshane), lived in a narrow, towering six-story dumbbell tenement at 538 East 6th Street along with his wife, Liba ("Lizzie"), three children (they would eventually have four more), Liba's sister Victoria, Max's brother Froim, and a boarder. The eight of them shared an apartment smaller than the family room of the house I live in today.[14]

As the *Times* had predicted, dumbbell tenements did not alleviate any of the problems they were designed to solve. "The greatest evil is the lack of light and air," lamented one tenement resident. Rear rooms in the dumbbell buildings might receive a bit more light than those in barracks-style buildings, but "the airshaft is so narrow," she complained, often measuring just eighteen inches across, that the benefit to the residents below the top floor was negligible.[15]

In fact, the airshafts exacerbated two other problems — noise and stench — that had long plagued tenement dwellers. The shafts acted as echo chambers that amplified the sounds of screaming babies, boisterous children, and quarreling adults. In the barracks-style tenement, inhabitants could hear noise from apartments above, below, and next to their own, but with the advent of the airshaft, sounds from half the apartments in the building (and half the apartments in the tenement next door if it had an adjoining airshaft) were transported loudly and clearly into every other flat. "The noise hurts me," lamented one New York tenement dweller. "It comes down the airshaft so that sometimes I can't sleep." The racket from the airshafts combined with the unending din emanating day and night from the streets prompted those inside the tenements to





There is no photograph that can do justice to the dumbbell tenement airshaft. Jacob Riis's photo of a tin bathtub hanging under a window inside an airshaft gives some sense of its narrow dimensions, as does this photo of a tenement rooftop with children.

yell in order to be heard. "It becomes habitual for us to raise our voices," as one Lower East Side resident put it, raising the decibel level still further and making life for those living in tenements even more miserable.

Airshafts also worsened the "vile stench" that often permeated the Lower East Side's tenements. A woman who lived at the bottom of a five-story tenement reported that her upstairs neighbors constantly "throw out garbage and dirty papers and the insides of chickens, and other unmentionable filth" into the airshaft. "Unmentionable filth" undoubtedly referred to the contents of chamber pots or dirty diapers which some tenants tossed out their windows rather than allowing them to accumulate inside their own apartments. "Because of the refuse thrown down in the airshaft," testified another tenement dweller, Henry Moscowitz of 95 Forsyth Street, "the stench is so vile and the air is so foul that the occupants do not employ the windows as a means of getting air." Between the noise and the smell, nearly all tenement dwellers kept their airshaft windows closed.[16]

As a result, dumbbell tenements remained just as torturously hot in summertime as the old barracks-style buildings. With huge brick edifices soaking up the summer sun and more than a hundred perspiring, sweltering residents inhabiting each one, charity workers found "tenement districts" like the Lower East Side and Little Italy "ten times hotter" than middle-class neighborhoods just a few blocks away. This helps to explain why the thoroughfares in immigrant neighborhoods were thronged day and night, as inhabitants tried to spend as little time as possible in their torrid apartments. As they had in the Civil War years, thousands of immigrants slept on their rooftops in the summer and thousands more spent the night on fire escapes. In order to fit as many family members on the fire escapes as possible, some ingenious residents used iron pins to fasten planks to the exterior walls of their tenement buildings, creating outdoor bunk beds, an arrangement copied, according to the *Tribune*, "from the upper Bronx to the Armenian quarter, near the Battery."[17]

In the early twentieth century, city officials began to allow New Yorkers to sleep in parks during heat emergencies. And on one Saturday night in 1915, twenty thousand city residents slept on the beach at Coney Island rather than endure another night in their sweltering apartments. Nonetheless, many tenement dwellers, especially the sick and elderly, succumbed to heat prostration and dehydration during heat waves. In July 1901, eighty-seven New Yorkers perished as temperatures reached ninety-eight degrees. Two years later, forty-four New Yorkers died over two days when temperatures hit the mid-nineties. With so many more people per acre, and so many more brick tenements per block, heat-related deaths became much more common in the early twentieth century than they had been in the Civil War era.[18]

Dumbbell tenements were also more prone to fatal fires than the barracks-style buildings. "It started in the basement of the building and ran swiftly up the airshaft," newspapers reported with alarming frequency, in this case describing an unusually deadly fire that killed eighteen tenement residents in 1903. "The airshaft again played the leading part," began the description of another blaze, this one in 1891. Deadly tenement fires, a relative rarity in the antebellum years, became a weekly occurrence by 1900. Press accounts of these blazes were often heartrending, as in the one at 137 Orchard Street in 1893 that took the life of twenty-two-year-old tinsmith Morris Cohen, his twenty-year-old wife, Sophia, and their three-month-old daughter Esther. Sophia was found dead of smoke inhalation on the floor of her fifth-story apartment, with her lifeless baby "closely pressed to her heart."[19]

Sometimes the airshaft actually offered tenement dwellers a means of escape from dumbbell blazes. In cases where the flames were confined to the interior of the building, the inhabitants of one double-decker could climb to safety out their airshaft windows and into those of the building next door. This was one of the rare occasions when having a neighbor's windows just inches away seemed a blessing rather than a curse.[20]

Despite this one benefit, the New York State legislature's tenement committee called "the 'double-decker' . . . the one hopeless form of tenement-house

construction" because it "can not be well ventilated; it can not be well lighted; it is not safe in case of fire." The immigrants heartily agreed. When one was asked in 1900 by a member of the state tenement commission how she would like to see tenements changed, she "exclaimed without a moment's hesitation and very emphatically: 'No airshafts!'"[21]

In 1901 the New York state legislature banned the construction of new dumbbell tenements, requiring residential buildings to occupy a smaller portion of each lot and creating setback rules that mandated far more space between exterior windows and adjacent buildings. But because a building constructed according to these new rules on Manhattan's predominant twenty-five-by-one-hundred-foot lots could house far fewer families than existing tenements, landlords chose to keep their old but lucrative buildings rather than replace them. The new law thus had so little impact on the Lower East Side that by 1916, fifteen years after it went into effect, 92 percent of the neighborhood's tenements were still either dumbbell buildings or the even more crowded and dilapidated barracks-style structures. In that year, in fact, the Lower East Side still had three barracks-style tenements for every dumbbell tenement. Today, nearly all these tenements are still standing — and inhabited, but by far, far fewer people.[22]

Irish and Italian men tended to leave their tenement neighborhoods six days a week to go to work, but tens of thousands of Jews were employed *inside* neighborhood tenements, contributing to the Lower East Side's unprecedented overcrowding. "The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also," wrote Riis in 1890. "You are made fully aware of it before you have travelled the length of a single block in any of these East Side streets, by the whir of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from earliest dawn till mind and muscle give out together."

This was hardly an exaggeration. New York's Jewish immigrants flocked to the garment industry just as Irish immigrants had taken to day labor and domestic service. As the *Herald* noted, "the most familiar sound in these streets is the click of the sewing machine; the most familiar sight men, women and children staggering along under the weight of huge packs of half-finished clothing." Because this work was so often done at home, Riis noted, "every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, bears a hand, shut in the qualmy rooms, where meals are cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, the livelong day. It is not unusual to find a dozen persons — men, women, and children — at work in a single small room." By 1900, 90 percent of jobs in New York's garment industry were held by Jews.[23]

Several factors contributed to this Jewish dominance. Restrictions placed

Jacob Riis titled this photo "Knee-Pants at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen — A Ludlow Street Sweater's Shop."

on Jews in the Pale of Settlement had forced them out of agricultural work and into the large towns and cities of Russia and Poland, where they had adopted urban trades such as tailoring. Then, when the first east European Jews arrived in New York in the late nineteenth century, they found that the German Jews already living on the Lower East Side dominated the clothing industry there and were more willing to employ them than were other New Yorkers. They also liked working with other Jews. "Even a greenhorn feels at home in a tailor shop," one immigrant wrote, recollecting his first days in New York. "I felt a bit surer of the work and that people would treat me like a human being." Finally, the new immigrants also gravitated to this work because the industry's predominantly Jewish employers were more likely than others to allow them to observe the Jewish Sabbath by working Sundays rather than Saturdays.[24]

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that most Jewish immigrants came to New York with experience making clothing for a living. Only one-third of New York's Jewish immigrants could find work in the same occupation they had followed in the Pale. Aaron Domnitz, for example, had been a teacher in the shtetl of Slutsk near Minsk. "My plan was to learn a trade, work and be

independent," he recalled years later in an autobiographical sketch. He tried to get an apprenticeship with a plumber, but without a landsman or relative willing to train him, "the trade was completely closed to outsiders who wanted to get in." He tried large metal factories, anything "as long as it wasn't tailoring," but the work was either too difficult or too boring and low paid. Finally, he later recalled, "I got tired of constantly changing jobs and looking for work. I felt the need to have stable employment with a more or less secure income." His friends and relatives told him "that it was now time to settle down and do what everyone else did — become a tailor. I became a tailor."[25]

Facing such unexpected obstacles, many newly arrived immigrants became depressed, wondering why they had moved so far from everything that was familiar and comforting and come to a world that was so different, so difficult, so expensive — so *foreign*. Morris Raphael Cohen could not believe the "intensity and hurry" that Americans demanded, a sharp contrast to the "leisurely" pace of work and life in Minsk. Marcus Ravage recalled, "With every day that passed I became more and more overwhelmed." In these first, doubt-filled weeks, the newcomers missed almost everything they had left behind. "I am overcome with longing," wrote one immigrant, "not only for my Jewish world, which I have lost, but also for Russia." They had traded the fresh air of Russia for the "gray, stone world of tall tenements, where even on the loveliest spring day there was not a blade of grass . . . The sun, gray and depressed; the men and women clustered around the pushcarts; the gray walls of the tenements — all looks sad." Some were so wracked with despair that they wrote letters to their homeland warning others there not to make the same mistake they had. "For God's sake, do not come here," wrote one new immigrant to a Yiddish newspaper in Poland. All Americans care about is "money and money and again money." Abraham Cahan expressed similar sentiments in a letter to a Russian newspaper. "Curse you, emigration," he cried. "How many lives have you broken, how many brave and mighty have you rubbed out like dust!" But most of the immigrants managed to fight through such despondency. "I promised myself that I would never set eyes on Warsaw again," one Polish Jew reminded himself in those demoralizing first months in New York, "and I'll keep my word."[26]

Whether or not my great-grandfather Froim Leib Anbinder battled such doubts, he must have found the lack of employment options demoralizing. In his shtetl in Ukraine, he had probably worked at the family inn; he told the inspectors at Ellis Island that he had been a "merchant." Now, without the capital to start his own business in New York, and needing to earn and save money to bring his wife and five children to America, he took work as a lowly presser, ironing the clothes that other garment workers had sewn to make them ready for the wholesaler who had ordered them. Pressers were not paid as well as cutters or those who operated sewing machines. It was also taxing labor, requiring one to stand all day, Riis observed, over "a big red-hot stove to keep the pressing irons ready for use," even in the heat of summer inside sweltering tenements.[27]

Like most Jewish newcomers, Froim Leib probably found his first job in New York through a "landsman," someone from his hometown of Holoskov. "We knew which landsman was looking for a new place and who could take someone in to work," Domnitz recollected. "Nearly everyone had a greenhorn [new immigrant] guest or expected to get one soon. They were always occupied with looking for work for new arrivals . . . To take someone into your shop was considered the greatest good deed, almost the only good deed" that immigrants could perform for the even more recent arrivals. The newcomers would eventually look for something better than that initial menial job, and they would again turn to landsmen for leads and advice. The importance of landsmen in the lives of the Jewish immigrants was reflected in the fact that New York's Jews created more than one thousand *landsmanschaften* — "hometown associations" — which pooled dues money to provide assistance to the sick and unemployed and sometimes even covered burial costs when the immigrants passed away.[28]

But even before the search for a job began, an immigrant's family or landsmen already living in New York would insist on taking the newcomer to buy new clothes. "You think you can walk around like that, looking as green as grass?" Louis Waldman's sister Anna asked the Ukrainian immigrant rhetorically upon his arrival from Ellis Island at the family's Orchard Street apartment in 1909. "Why, no one, not even a peddler, will give you a job!" Domnitz recalled with relish the times he took newcomers to buy their first American clothing. "Going to the stores with the greenhorn on Canal Street was a joyful procedure," he wrote. "Everything had to be American. Clothes from home were defective, even if they were of good quality and well sewn." Having completed the transformation, the greenhorn was often taken to a photographer's studio so that his or her picture could be sent to relatives still in Europe.[29]

Immediately after ceremonially purchasing their first set of American clothes, the new immigrants had to find jobs, for as they quickly discovered, in America, even more so than in the Pale, "work, mean, hard, endless work, is the order of the Jew's life." When we think of the garment work that Froim Leib and his landsmen did on the Lower East Side, what invariably comes to mind is the "sweatshop," a large workplace in which employers compelled dozens of immigrants to toil long hours in unhealthy conditions for meager pay. But the original sweatshops were housed in tiny tenement apartments. Only after New York banned tenement workshops in 1892 did clothing contractors begin mov-

ing their employees to the commercial workspaces we associate with sweatshop labor. Even after 1900, thousands of immigrants continued to do garment work illicitly in their tiny tenement homes.[30]

The "sweating" system out of which the sweatshop developed had its origins in the long-standing practice whereby clothing manufacturers farmed out tasks to the poorest and most desperate workers, those least likely to complain about the starvation wages. In mid-nineteenth-century New York, these needleworkers were typically widowed women with children or Irish and German Jewish immigrants. As the Irish became more prosperous, and the number of east European Jews in New York grew exponentially, Jewish immigrants came to dominate the manufacturing end of the garment industry.[31]

Here's how the sweating system worked. A large clothing retailer — the Sears, Roebuck catalogue company, for example — might solicit bids from wholesalers for ten thousand pairs of boys' knickers, known as "knee pants." The lowest bidding wholesaler would then seek bids from among the thousands of New York clothing contractors, and might allot one thousand pairs each to the ten lowest bidders. These contractors would then subcontract the work to the family-operated garment shops like the one Riis photographed on Ludlow Street, whose proprietor had agreed to make knee pants for forty-five cents per dozen. The wholesaler provided the cloth to the contractors, who passed it down to the garment shop proprietors.

This garment worker, photographed by Lewis Hine around 1908, appears to be carrying finished clothing from her workplace back to a contractor.

In the typical tenement garment workshop, the proprietor would break the production of the knee pants into separate tasks, doing the most highly skilled work (cutting the cloth and operating the sewing machine to assemble the pants) himself while hiring employees to do the rest. After the cloth was cut, a "baster" pinned the various pieces together so that the sewing machine operator could focus solely on stitching the pieces of cloth into one article of clothing. Depending on the complexity of the task required of the baster, he or she might get ten to twelve cents per dozen pairs of knee pants. After being sewn together, the pants went to the buttonhole maker, typically a young apprentice, who earned eight to ten cents per hundred buttonholes sewn. The "finisher," usually a woman in her teens or twenties earning perhaps ten cents per dozen, then put the finishing touches (such as sewing buttons) on the pants by hand. Finally, the knee pants went to the presser, who might get paid eight cents per dozen pairs of pants pressed.

Many contractors managed to squeeze two such teams of workers into a single twelve-by-twelve-foot tenement room. When they could not quite fit, the workers might spill out into the hallways, and "when the weather permits," inspectors reported, it was not uncommon to see "the fire-escapes occupied by from two to four busy workmen." For more complicated garments, such as men's coats, two or three basters and finishers might be employed, each with different tasks. The contractor's children might be put to work at any of these jobs once old enough to learn them. Even before that, they might pull loose threads from the finished garments, bring materials to the workers, and sweep up the ever-growing piles of scraps and dust. The crowding of workers in these tenement garment shops created especially trying conditions for young, unmarried women. "Keep your hands off, please," was the first English phrase that Rose Cohen, a twelve-year-old baster in a Monroe Street tenement garment shop, learned from an older female co-worker who used it to fend off advances from her boss.[32]

With buildings groaning under the weight of both their residents and those who showed up to work in them each day, the Lower East Side's tenements quickly became run-down and dilapidated. A *Times* reporter visiting a tenement full of garment workers at the corner of Orchard and Broome streets in 1894 found that "the stairs were worn and splintered. The plaster was cracked and unspeakably foul. A few barrels of refuse of various kinds occupied the landing." The apartments in which garment work was done were littered with fabric scraps, coarsely torn strips of cloth, and bits of thread, often piled inches high on the floor. Yet neighboring apartments could be quite clean if no garment work was performed in them.[33]

The system of bidding out garment work to tenement workers became

known as the "sweating" system because all the participants in the manufacturing process — the retailer, the wholesaler, the contractor, and the subcontractor — "sweated" their profits out of those one level below them by compelling the subordinates to work incredibly long hours at a breakneck pace in order to make any money at all. To complete enough pieces each day to pay the rent, feed their families, and put some money aside for steamship tickets for loved ones waiting to be brought to America, garment workers took no breaks despite being hunched over their tables all day. They ate lunch at their workbenches and toiled late into the night. "There is no recognized [maximum] of working hours in most of these shops," noted an inspectors' report, "the limit being a matter of endurance, and sometimes ninety hours a week are worked." According to the *Tribune*, some employers demanded 108 hours of work per week from female garment workers. Each person in the chain referred to his or her boss as the "sweater," and the work done by those at the bottom of the hierarchy was known as "sweated labor." All these terms — "sweating," "sweater," and "sweated labor" — were widely used before the Civil War.[34]

The word "sweatshop," however, only entered the American lexicon in the 1890s, because it wasn't until 1892, when New York State banned the manufacture of clothing in tenements, that this work moved into commercial loft spaces, both on the Lower East Side and farther uptown. Even in these new locations, manufacturers continued to compel garment workers to toil long hours for pennies per garment sewn, and thus the "sweatshop" was born. Yet the law allowed small-scale manufacturing to continue in tenements as long as only immediate family members were employed and the workshop applied for and received a permit. In 1901, twenty thousand New Yorkers had permits for tenement work, and thousands of other garment workers took work home with the connivance of sweatshop owners. The sweating system trapped the city's Jews in what the *Herald* called a form of "servitude worse than that of Egypt" under the Pharaohs.[35]

One of the most difficult aspects of the Lower East Side garment industry was its seasonality. Then as now, people bought most of their clothing in the spring and fall, so while garment workers had steady employment in summer and winter, and were inundated with orders at the end of each of those seasons, they often found themselves underemployed or wholly unemployed the rest of the year. Those pennies per garment that they earned had to feed and house them and their families not just in the weeks they were working but also in the many weeks they were not. And during economic slowdowns, their situation became truly dire.

One year into the depression that began in the fall of 1893, a *Times* reporter found the Lower East Side full of "attenuated creatures, clad in old, faded,

A sweatshop at 30 Suffolk Street, photographed in 1908 by Lewis Hine.

greasy, often tattered clothing . . . All of them only too plainly suffer from a perpetual insufficiency of food," with the result that their "cheeks are pinched and pale and hollow." They looked "like a group of figures from a life-size picture of a famine."[36]

Immigrant garment workers were also notorious for their poor health. They "fill the air with incessant coughing," noted a *Times* reporter in 1894. Some suffered from tuberculosis (known in those days as "consumption"), a bacterial infection of the lungs that spread especially easily in the close confines of tenement workshops and sweatshops. The Lower East Side's tenements, according to one charitable organization, "are known to be hotbeds of the disease, the very walls reeking with it." But despite the popular stereotype of the time that portrayed them as more prone to tuberculosis than other New Yorkers, Jews actually contracted the disease at a much *lower* rate than other city residents. What most of the Lower East Side's chronic coughers had actually contracted was bronchitis or asthma from years of working in poorly ventilated garment shops whose air was filled with soot, tiny shreds of fabric, and what one garment worker recalled as "millions of specks of dust."[37]

Despite public perceptions to the contrary, the majority of New York's employed male east European Jewish immigrants were not garment workers. In 1900, only 38 percent of them made clothing, though the figure rose to 44 percent on the Lower East Side.[38]

Jewish immigrant women, however, had fewer employment options than men, so nearly two-thirds of employed female east European Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side in 1900 were garment workers. Another 9 percent were employed as domestic servants. The remaining women were divided evenly among business owners (5 percent, mostly shopkeepers), office workers (5 percent), skilled workers (5 percent, mostly cigar makers), and non–garment factory workers (5 percent). Only 2 percent worked as teachers or nurses. Young east European Jewish women labored outside the home much more often in New York than they had in Europe, in part because they could do so without endangering their marriage prospects. "The girl has lots of time. America is not Poland," immigrant Sophie Ruskay remembered being told. "Here a girl is not considered an old maid until she is at least twenty."[39]

There were thousands of Lower East Side women who earned money for their families by taking charge of boarders — making up their beds each day, cooking their food, and doing their laundry. According to a congressional report published in 1911, 48 percent of New York's Russian Jewish immigrant households rented space to at least one lodger; 30 percent of Jews from other parts of eastern Europe did so. Taking in boarders was, according to one historian, "by far the most important economic activity for Jewish immigrant wives."[40]

Jewish immigrants who worked in the garment business did not typically do so for their entire adult lives. "The Jew considers the industry as a stepping stone to something higher," wrote economist Jesse Pope in an exhaustively detailed study of the garment trade published in 1905. "Every year large numbers desert the clothing industry to go into such occupations as small shopkeepers, insurance agents, and clerks." My grandfather Tulea Anbinder was a prime example. Arriving in New York at age thirteen in 1921, he finished school and then went to work in the garment industry. By 1940, however, he had become a dentist. Others did not leave the garment industry but worked their way up to better positions within it. Tulea's father, Froim Leib, for example, was still a presser in 1925, fifteen years after his arrival in America, but by 1930 he had managed to become a garment contractor, employing Tulea and his sisters Florence, Rae, and Sonia as sewing machine operators in the family business making baby clothes.[41]

For east European Jewish men looking to move out of the garment industry, there was virtually no occupational field that was off limits. About one-fifth of them in 1900 worked in what might be called a "skilled trade" outside the garment industry. As Domnitz had discovered, breaking into the most lucrative building and metal crafts was difficult, and as a result, most skilled Jewish workers were cigar makers, butchers, bakers, or painters (the least well-paid job in the building industry). Eight percent worked at what might be termed "unskilled" jobs requiring little previous training, such as day laborer, porter, and janitor, and another 8 percent worked in lower-status white-collar jobs as clerks or salesmen. In 1900, only 1 percent worked in the "professions" as a doctor, lawyer, dentist, or rabbi.

The single most popular vocation for east European Jews in New York outside the garment industry was retailing. In 1900, about one in six male east European Jewish immigrants was a merchant of some kind — about two-thirds as storekeepers and the remainder as street peddlers. Many of the shopkeepers had started out as peddlers. Peddling was attractive to devout Jews who balked at entering the garment industry, where the sweating system might force them to work on the Sabbath. Others tried peddling out of desperation, while still others did so because it allowed them to remain connected to the occupation they had followed in eastern Europe.[42]

Minnie Goldstein, for example, who immigrated to New York from Warsaw as a child, recalled that when her father failed in his attempts to resume work as a shoemaker after his arrival in New York, he began peddling baby shoes manufactured in the United States. "He took a wooden box, bought some baby shoes, took up position on Hester Street, and sold the shoes at a profit of five or ten cents a pair . . . Before very long the women of Hester Street found out that my father would sell them a pair of shoes for thirty cents, while they had to pay fifty cents in a store for the same pair" elsewhere. Goldstein eventually made enough money as a peddler to rent a storefront on Hester Street from which he sold both children's and adult shoes.[43]

Others peddled their wares door-to-door. If a Jewish immigrant "straight off the boat" tried to peddle in non-Jewish neighborhoods, he would have to memorize the English names of the goods he hoped to sell. "Suspenders, collah buttons, 'lastic, matches, henkeches — please, lady, buy," he might plead to the skeptical housewives he encountered uptown. If they had a question or a comment, he could do little but repeat the line he had committed to memory.[44]

Isaac Benequit began peddling to escape the drudgery of sewing shirtsleeves in a sweatshop. On the advice of a landsman, he began selling straw baskets on Saturdays outside the Washington Market, a wholesale emporium at the northwest corner of Chambers and Greenwich streets, where shoppers often struggled to carry all their purchases. He earned more peddling on Saturdays alone than he had been making in an entire week doing garment work. "In seven weeks I saved up sixty-five dollars apart from what I paid my mother every week for food," he wrote in a memoir. What did he do with his profits? "I borrowed a few more dollars from my mother — and became the 'boss' of a shirt factory." But Benequit found himself torn between idealism and profit, and

closed his business at one point so he could join a garment workers' union and lead strikes. Later he became president of a paper manufacturing company and spent the last decade of his business career investing in real estate. The conflict in his own mind between the benefits of capital and the rights of labor clearly troubled him to his dying day. On his deathbed he felt compelled to assure his friends and family, "My soul is with the labor movement."[45]

Jewish peddlers who took to the road to sell in the countryside carried all their wares — typically eighty pounds on their backs and a forty-pound "balancer" on their chests. But those who remained in New York City usually displayed their wares on a rented pushcart. Many of the Lower East Side's streets became almost impassable because of the dozens of pushcarts set up on the district's busiest blocks. The city's "army of pushcart men, twenty-five thousand strong," reported a journalist in 1906, "turns whole blocks of the East Side Jewry into a bazaar, with high-piled carts lining the curb." Jewish pushcart peddlers worked primarily in Jewish enclaves, but on weekends often ventured into Irish and Italian neighborhoods as well.[46]

"Every conceivable thing is for sale" from the Lower East Side's pushcarts, observed the New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1900. Harry Roskolenko likewise remembered that "everything in the cosmos was on a pushcart for somebody at some sort of price," as long as that price was "cheap." On a visit to Hester Street in the late 1880s, Riis found "bandannas and tin cups at two cents, peaches at a cent a quart, 'damaged' eggs for a song, hats for a quarter, and spectacles, warranted to suit the eye . . . for thirty-five cents . . . Old coats are hawked for fifty cents, 'as good as new,' and 'pants' . . . at anything that can be got."[47]

The scene at a pushcart market on a Friday afternoon was both colorful and chaotic. "There seems to be no order," observed a Romanian immigrant:

> The push-cart venders call out their wares in a Babel of tongues, in the sing-song of the Talmud and the wailing of the prayer of the Day of Atonement. Bearded men and mustached men, blond men and high-cheekboned men, with their wives, stout and thick, and their daughters, bob-haired and trim, stand behind the glare of the burning white light of the acetylene lamps, yelling, talking, calling, and singing while dealing and bargaining with the customers pressing around them. One is carried along by the wave of humanity pressing homeward and from all sides. If one wants to buy something at a push-cart one holds on to it as if firm ground in an attempt to get to the shore had suddenly been struck.

Lower East Side pushcart peddlers had to adapt their trade to the modest means of their customers. According to the state labor bureau, "the yolk or the white of an egg, or a chicken leg or wing, or an ounce of tea, coffee, or butter, is not an uncommon purchase." The most successful pushcart peddlers were those who, as Roskolenko put it, used both "moral and economic cunning" to wring profits from even the smallest transactions.[48]

Pushcart peddlers two rows deep on Hester Street in 1898.

Even more than garment workers, pushcart peddlers saw their vocation as a starting point on their way to something more respectable, stable, and remunerative. "The pushcart is a means to an end," a journalist observed in 1905 in an article about these street peddlers. "He is a pushcart man only until by means of his cart he can step to something higher." Indeed, a comparison of the occupations of New York's east European Jewish immigrants in 1900 and 1920 indicates that most peddlers succeeded in achieving "something higher." In that twenty-year period, the proportion of Jewish immigrants working as peddlers dropped by nearly 75 percent. The percentage toiling in garment sweatshops fell by more than a quarter. Meanwhile, the proportion of business owners increased by more than a third and the percentage of men working as office clerks, as salesmen, or in managerial jobs nearly doubled. The proportion of professionals doubled too, albeit to only 2 percent of the whole.[49]

The occupational opportunities for east European Jewish immigrant women also changed from 1900 to 1920. In 1920 a smaller proportion of Jewish immigrant women were employed outside the home, and of those who reported being employed, the percentage working in the garment industry had fallen to 45

lynites resented these changes. Brownsville had "very much deteriorated by the settling of a low class of Hebrews," complained the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which especially objected to Jews opening small shops or doing garment work in buildings that had once been strictly residential. Nonetheless, the influx of Jews continued unabated. By 1920, 80 percent of Brownsville's 100,000 residents were Jewish immigrants and their children.[55]

With real estate prices skyrocketing in Brownsville, Jews seeking more reasonably priced housing left the neighborhood for even more far-flung portions of Brooklyn. Many moved farther east, to East New York, or southeast to the New Lots district. The Dandeshanes joined this migration, relocating to 311 Hinsdale Street in East New York by 1920. Max, who had been working in a garment factory in 1910, was back at mattress stuffing by this point. Never very well-off, he, his wife, and six daughters rented the basement apartment of the two-story house that remains there today. (The owner, with a wife and six children of his own, occupied the rest of the house.) A few years after the Dandeshanes arrived in East New York, the Anbinders moved there too, to 636 Miller Avenue, just half a mile east of the Dandeshanes. They managed to purchase the house by 1930, though they rented the basement to tenants to help make it affordable. Later on, as Jewish immigrants such as the Anbinders and the Dandeshanes continued to improve their socioeconomic status, they would begin to relocate to more affluent parts of Brooklyn, such as Midwood and Flatbush.[56]

Whether they were affluent or just scraping by, living in a spacious apartment on the Grand Concourse or in a tiny two-room tenement apartment on the Lower East Side, food played a central role in the lives of Jewish immigrants. At no time of the week was this more evident than in their efforts, no matter what their budgets, to make their Friday night Sabbath meal special. "Everything was so tasty, it melted in one's mouth," recalled Louis Lozowick, an American painter who was born in Ukraine and came to the United States in 1906, of his Friday night meals in America. "Chicken noodle soup, chopped liver with onions and chicken fat, roast chicken, and compote of carrots and prunes . . . And last, the crowning glory of a Sabbath meal, the *kugel* made of noodles or potatoes filled with raisins and other goodies."[57]

When a family's financial situation became truly dire, of course, even the Friday night menu underwent changes. Samuel Golden recalled "periodic unemployment seasons, during which my father earned no money." In those dark days, "the food we ate underwent a complete change. Tastier dishes disappeared and the menu eventually consisted almost entirely of bread, butter, herring and potatoes."[58]

Another Jewish staple during hard times was the pickle. "Pickles are [a] favorite food in Jewtown," reported Jacob Riis in 1890, noting that many destitute Jewish newcomers subsisted on bread and pickles alone. Immigrants told Riis that they relied on pickles because they "are filling, and keep the children from crying with hunger." In fact, a pickle sandwich was a typical Lower East Side lunch for those who were unemployed or scrimping and saving to bring family members to America.[59]

As Jewish immigrants became more financially stable, they began to partake of the American custom of eating out, which the *Forward* reported "is spreading every day, especially in New York." To meet this demand, the iconic New York Jewish "deli" was born. In their delis, Jews could enjoy smoked fish, borscht, matzo ball soup, corned beef and pastrami sandwiches on rye, and cream soda or Cel-Ray tonic. Some of these foods, like corned beef, had been served in New York for generations. Others, like pastrami, a beef brisket that is brined, then covered in a dry rub of salt and spices before being smoked and later steamed, only arrived in New York with the east European Jews. One of its most famous purveyors, Katz's Deli, has been operating on the block of Ludlow Street that intersects with Houston for more than 125 years.[60]

For many Jews, delis became hubs for socializing, fulfilling the same role in their community that the saloon did for Irish New Yorkers. "It was as if we had entered into our rightful heritage," recalled Alfred Kazin of the feeling he got as a boy when he crossed the threshold into his local Jewish deli. Yet for most Jews in this era, who were still hoping to move to a better neighborhood or put away a nest egg for the future, the deli was at most a once-a-week treat. In Kazin's family, deli fare "was food that only on Saturday nights could be eaten with a good conscience."[61]

Because those who strictly followed Jewish dietary laws would not eat meat and dairy products at the same meal, Jewish New Yorkers also opened "dairy restaurants." The most famous was Ratner's, first on Pitt Street, but after 1918 at 138 Delancey. There, diners could enjoy cheese blintzes, kreplach (dumplings), and Ratner's famous gefilte fish. The restaurant's borscht, potato soup, and kasha varnishkes (buckwheat groats with noodles) were also Lower East Side favorites. For dessert there was cheesecake, or one could opt for the ultimate Jewish comfort food, sour cream with bananas. In its heyday, Ratner's served 2,500 customers a day.[62]

By 1920, about 1.6 million Jews (both immigrants and native-born) lived in New York, around three-quarters of them in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Yet until their dying day, the city's east European Jewish immigrants considered their

years on the Lower East Side their formative American experience. After passing through Ellis Island and finding a home and a job with the help of landsmen, the typical Jewish immigrant would rarely (if ever) have ventured west of the Bowery or north of 14th Street. Almost all of them, men and women, boys and girls, would have done at least some garment work, either at home, in a neighbor's tenement apartment, or in a sweatshop. They could go months, even years, without having to speak a word of English, because at work, in the market, and in their tenements, almost everyone spoke Yiddish, and those who did not spoke Russian or Polish. Even after several years in New York, an excursion to Midtown or Central Park would have been both frightening (especially for women) and exotic, like a trip to a foreign country. Some immigrants called such an outing going "to America."[63]

Just across the Bowery there was another enclave, Little Italy, whose inhabitants went through many of the same experiences as the newcomers on the Lower East Side. The Italians lived in overcrowded, dilapidated tenements. They depended on *paesani*, other immigrants from the same parts of Italy, for help finding housing and work. They could go years in America without speaking more than a few words of English. And most of them would eventually move out of their initial lower Manhattan neighborhood to cleaner, healthier, roomier housing in the city's outer boroughs. Yet Little Italy, like the Lower East Side, was its own entire world.

17

LITTLE ITALYS

WHEN PASQUALE D'ANGELO arrived in New York in April 1910 from Introdacqua, a mountainous village eighty miles east of Rome in the Abruzzi region of central Italy, he discovered that life in America as a day laborer would not be as easy as he had imagined. "Everywhere was toil — endless, continuous toil, in the flooding blaze of the sun, or in the slashing rain — toil." D'Angelo, along with his father, Angelo, and seven other townsmen, were met at the Battery by an Italian labor contractor (*padrone* in Italian) from the same part of Italy. He had jobs waiting for them building roads 125 miles north of New York City. Although it was illegal to enter the United States with a job already arranged, back then, as today, day laborers had no trouble finding contractors who were willing to flout the law.

D'Angelo initially liked his new life. He was only sixteen, with a strong back and plenty of experience doing hard work in the fields surrounding Introdacqua. But when the contractor ran out of jobs for D'Angelo and his "gang," their prospects worsened. New bosses were cruel, the pay was miserable, and the work was often very dangerous. Two of D'Angelo's co-workers were crushed to death by a falling derrick on a railroad construction site. Over the course of about two years, D'Angelo and his surviving co-workers found employment in Spring Valley, Tappan, Poughkeepsie, Staatsburg, and Glens Falls along the Hudson, Utica and Oneonta in central New York, White Lake in the Catskills, and Otter Lake in the Adirondacks, as well as in Westwood and Ramsey, New Jersey, Falling Waters, West Virginia, Williamsport, Maryland, "and many other places . . . , always as a pick and shovel man."

When a job ended and a new one could not be found nearby, D'Angelo and his compatriots often returned to New York's Mulberry Street, headquarters of dozens of Italian *padroni*. In Five Points, D'Angelo and his friends would rent spots in one of the overcrowded boardinghouses on Bayard Street, enjoy a brief